

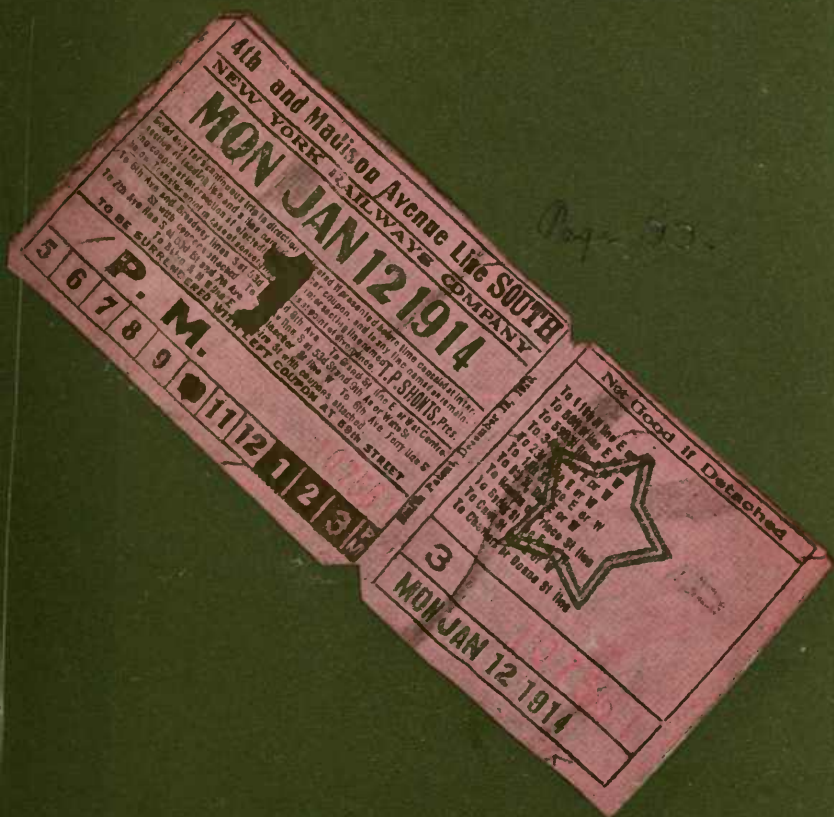
THE
ALSTER
CASE

RUFUS GILLMORE

J. T. HOPKINS

THE murdered victim of this exciting mystery story is Miss Cornelia Alster, a wealthy spinster, a member of one of New York's old families. She is an eccentric, alienated from all her relatives, lavishing her benefactions upon proteges, the latest being a young lawyer, Robert Swan, poor but capable, and deeply in love with the younger of her two adopted nieces. Suspicion falls mainly upon the very niece with whom he is in love, and Swan is greatly concerned. One of the cleverest developments in this story comes when the murderer himself joins in the hunt. Even the professional reader will find himself unable to guess the mystery. The solution comes as a distinct surprise in almost the last words of the story.

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“There was . . . a sound of a falling body. Then
Trask sprang through the opening.”

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BY
RUFUS GILLMORE

AUTHOR OF "THE OPAL PIN," "THE MYSTERY OF
THE SECOND SHOT," ETC.



ILLUSTRATED BY
CHARLES L. WRENN

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TO
FREDERICK GILLMORE

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I

ON the morning after the murder I arrived at the office late. Having been outrageously overworked and, having gone through more of late than is given to many men to endure, I had barely closed my eyes the night before, and was in a highly overwrought and nervous condition. I remember that I went straight to my desk, forgetting my customary "Good morning" to the office boy, neglecting even that welcoming smile from pretty Miss Walsh with which my day's work ordinarily began.

Miss Walsh, let it be known, was not only an exceedingly pretty stenographer, but the one human being in that outer office of Avery, Avery & Avery who made any endeavor to lessen my burden. The two surviving members of the firm thrust work upon me daily which I never could have pretended to complete without her voluntary aid. Moreover, she not only relieved me, or assisted me in my tasks, in

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that inordinately successful law office, but in many delicate ways she conveyed to me the impression that I had both her sympathy and appreciation for all I endured there.

Barely had I seated myself at my desk in the outer office this morning before Miss Walsh stole quietly over to me. Pretending to be in search of something among the piled up papers on my desk, yet with a woman's eye out for interruptions, she whispered:

"Lim, Junior, has been running in and out after you like a chipmunk."

Limousine, Junior, the younger of the Averys, was secretly called this because he dashed about in the family limousine whenever his father was out of town or could not contrive another use for it. He was also my particular slave-driver, and, being in the middle twenties, and hence a year or two younger than I, he took great delight in making an ostentation of his authority over me. I already bore three-quarters of the burden of his work—without complaint or protest, because there was no escape. My father had given up the struggle and committed suicide; I was the only one of the family yet started on a career; my mother, way out in that

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little town in Ohio, needed what I earned merely to feed and clothe and house herself and my younger brothers and sisters. I had given hostages. I was dependent, in its lowest, clerkly form. And the Averys made the most of it.

"Does he want anything except——" I reached for the clutter of law books at the back of my desk. I did not finish. It wasn't necessary with Miss Walsh.

"No, I think——" Miss Walsh stopped abruptly. She picked up a slip of blank paper, and scurried away to her own desk, just as the younger of the Averys flung open the door of his private office and headed furiously toward me.

"Where are those references on the Hawley case you were to have ready for me this morning?" he demanded nippingly.

"I'm sorry——"

"Not ready?" There was a snarl in his voice, and his young, immature face gathered in an insulting look.

"All but two," I murmured, opening one of the books and burying my face in it.

"'All but two!'" he mocked. "What's the use? Court opens at ten. It's after nine now and me

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here sitting waiting for you to condescend to come to work. What's the matter with you lately, Swan?"

"Nothing—unless it's too much work for one man. I worked until after six on these references last night."

"Well—couldn't you work later?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I had an engagement," I answered with a meekness which was loaded.

"Engagement! Engagement with whom?"

"Must I tell you?" I was even meeker.

"'Must you tell me!'" Never was there a man who could mock one more insolently. "Far be it from me to inquire into the hidden and private adventures of one of you quiet ones. Still waters run deep and——" he made an odious gesture. "But there's one thing I've had on my mind to tell you for a long time and now appears to be the occasion. I'm wise to a great deal more of what's happening about this office than you're aware of. I can't stop you from swelling out to dinners and shows, but if you want to save your bacon you'll quit trying to curry favor with those about this office by taking

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them along." His eyes shifted from mine, carrying the leer of an insinuation in the direction of Miss Walsh.

"It's lucky for you that she didn't see you," I predicted, flushing.

"Oh! So it wasn't she!" His delight in his discovery was sophomoric, disgusting.

"No."

"Well—of course—if you choose to tamper with the affections of the young ladies in any of the other offices in this building——"

I chose to leave his curiosity still unsatisfied. I knew the nature of the little beast.

"Whom was your engagement with?" he was forced to ask at last.

"With Miss Cornelia Alster," I answered quietly.

The news was the bomb to him that I expected. He stood for a moment regarding me blankly, his mouth agape, not the will power for a word left to his tongue. He was as one stunned with the magnificence of his blunder, the uncalculated possibilities of the news I had imparted. "Well—get out the rest of those references for me just as soon as you can," he ordered in a voice that he tried vainly to make sound natural.

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But though he retired at once so that his astonishment might not make more of a spectacle of him, sounds told me that he had borne the news straight to his father in the private office next to his. And even before I could complete the work for which he had been so insistent, word came that I was wanted by the senior and ruling member of the firm.

The younger of the Averys had evidently been told to leave further words and action to his father. At least he was not present, and the door between their private offices was tightly closed when I came upon my summons. The elder Avery was one of those bearded, squarely hewed, ponderous lawyers, without juice, as massive of body and weighty of manner as if he were one of the pillars in the Supreme Court of Justice. He was a superb, overbearing advocate of whatever cause he happened to take; he never appeared to hear the other side. He motioned me to a chair at his side.

"My son has just informed me," he stated, "that unknown to us you had an engagement with Miss Alster last night. Am I correctly informed?"

I nodded.

"It was with Miss Cornelia Alster—not with either of her charming nieces?"

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"Yes. With Miss Cornelia Alster."

"Hem!" He coughed, apparently for importance rather than need. "Mr. Swan," he began after a moment, "you're a nice, clean-looking, well-set-up young man, a credit to us, I hope. But I'm obliged to ask you one question. Was your engagement with Miss Alster last night a business or a social one?"

"Why do you ask me that, Mr. Avery?"

"For a number of reasons." He smoothed his beard. "For a number of reasons." He regarded me heavily with a baleful look that he intended to be subtle. "We won't go into them all. But I think I may go so far as to say—or rather to intimate—that we shall be guided by your answer as to whether we ought to make a charge to her for your services or not."

"She invited me to accompany her to the opera. You surely can't think of making any charge against her for that," I exclaimed.

"Ah, to the opera! Yes, yes; purely social. As you say, we should not think of making any charge for that. And now that this little question is so satisfactorily disposed of, I think I will take occasion to go into another matter that concerns you.

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How long have you known Miss Cornelia Alster?"

"Two or three weeks—a month at the outside." His question annoyed me; he knew very well how long I had known her.

"A month. Yes, let us call it a month. And she appears to have taken quite a fancy to you, has she?"

In spite of myself I blushed a little at the insinuation I suspected to be lurking behind his words. My gorge rose, as it was always rising in my dealings with the Averys, father or son. But I had sense enough to realize that he had said nothing as yet upon which to fasten offense. "Yes, she appears to like me," I responded guardedly. And then as his calm silence and scrutiny seemed to require more of me, I went on: "You may remember that her affairs were turned over to me several weeks ago because your son found it impossible to get along with her. I took the task with reluctance. I have had occasion to see her perhaps half a dozen times since, always at her own home, always on business connected with the estate. I found her eccentric, singularly intolerant of all advice, but as soon as I realized this we got along swimmingly. Yes, though

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I may be flattering myself, I think I may say that she seemed to like me. Last night's invitation to the opera proves that."

"Right, but do you know how little that means?" The senior Avery's voice rose a little.

"I trust I haven't appeared conceited over it."

"Hem!" His silence indicted me on that score all right. "We won't go into that. It isn't necessary. But I feel it my duty to counsel you on what leads up to that. If you have known Miss Alster for only a few weeks, you know little or nothing about her. We have handled her estate now for perhaps three years and we are the only lawyers in the city who have been able to retain it for more than a few months at a time. This must prove to you of itself that we understand Miss Alster—understand her thoroughly. And now, to give you the benefit of our experience, I want to tell you something about Miss Alster. She's a very fickle woman to do business with, to have any dealings with, social or otherwise. She's a woman of fine, strong, generous impulses, but they're not lasting. I feel it my duty to warn you. Her highly inflamed generosity is not to be counted on. Just as soon as she begins to show favor toward people, to do anything

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for them, they are lost. She begins to think they're ungrateful, she——"

"But I don't see why you take all this trouble to warn me when I have nothing to lose," I broke out.

"I have only——"

"Nevertheless," he silenced me with a broad, sweeping gesture, "nevertheless, I feel it my duty to do so. Now to prove my contention. You have doubtless met the two very beautiful and cultivated young women who live with her. They are understood to be her nieces. They are not." He paused merely to enjoy my astonishment. "Linda, the elder, is not related to her in any way. She was adopted in a generous impulse as a baby from what institution or person nobody knows. Beatrice, the younger, is the offspring of some distant connection, how remote or near, no one knows because Miss Alster by her eccentricities long ago alienated all her relations and friends."

I murmured my surprise.

"Now!" He brought his fist down ponderously on his desk but with care not to injure himself. "Now, to prove how fickle are her impulses. Twenty-two years ago she adopted Linda to be her heir. Fifteen years ago she discarded Linda from her

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affections, and brought Beatrice into her household to be educated as her heir. On her also she in time turned. Less than one year ago we made a new will in which she left all her estate, except a bare competence for each, to a certain specified list of charities."

I no longer murmured. I expressed my surprise.

"Whether it was fair to these two young women to bring them up accustomed to the luxuries she provided, whether either of them knows the emergencies they must later face, I don't say, likewise that is beside the question. All I feel the burden of to-day is to convince you that she is fickle and dangerous in the extreme to all young people who experience her favor and grow to rely upon it. To make quite sure that you shall not be misled in this way in spite of my words, I shall take steps to take over from you her affairs beginning with to-day. From now on, when she asks for you, you are to tell us. Either my son or I will attend to her business."

I stood and looked at him like any dolt. "But—but——" at last I sputtered.

"There are no buts about it. You are to do as I say or—or you have but one recourse—you can leave our employment."

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I still stood looking at him emptily, my indignation slowly rising to the surface.

"Do you agree to this?" he demanded severely.

My angry reply was ready, on the tip of my tongue, but, before I could answer, there came first a careless knock on his door and then his son swaggered into the room.

"Sorry, father," he said curtly, "but some lady just insists upon having Mr. Robert Swan come to the telephone."

I stood for the insult of his emphasis on the word "lady," likewise the censure of his father's look and gesture. I hurried out to the telephone booth in the outer office, and after a brief conversation I ran back with a haste that caused me to trip on the rug at the door and all but spill myself on the floor before the Averys.

"I do *not* agree," I yelled excitedly.

"What do you mean?" The elder Avery rose to his feet.

I endeavored to check my agitation. "I mean—I mean that I am no longer a slave that you can tell just what to do in hours and out of hours. I'm a free man and I shall do what I please."

My agitation seemed to pass from me to them.

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Harold Avery turned restively toward his father. "Going to stand for this?" he demanded sneeringly. And his father's cheeks grew red until they seemed as fire above his beard. He took a threatening step toward me, one hand clutching the edge of his desk as if he intended to hurl it at me. "Very well, go then," he yelled.

I turned to take him at his word. He leaped forward and seized me by the arm. "No. Wait!" he commanded. He had to pause a long time to regain control of his feelings. We stood and glared at each other. "What do you intend to do?" he demanded at last.

I was a little white, but I know I smiled. Our situations were quite reversed now. "There is no reason why I shouldn't tell you," I agreed. "From now on I am to have complete charge of Miss Alster's estate, the portion she has looked after herself as well as the small part you have had charge of. As this estate figures well up into the millions, I shall require virtually all my time. So you can discharge me or I resign—I don't much care which."

"We shall see about that." The elder Avery was regarding me with a smile. "We shall see about that," he repeated menacingly.

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I in turn smiled, smiled back at him, heedless for the first time in the three years of my servitude under him. Then I could not forbear making the most of my triumph. "You don't know," I stated, "but at Miss Alster's direction I drew up a new will for her last week," I shot.

He continued to smile. "Yes, yes—perhaps—what does that matter?" he rejoined. "There will be another will to-morrow and perchance another one next week, but that account will never leave our office for more than a few hours after I pull certain strings."

His assurance irritated me. "It's a trifle late for you to begin to pull any strings," I ventured.

"What do you mean?" They both asked it together.

"I mean that in the present will I am nominated to serve as sole executor of her entire estate and I expect to qualify under nominal bonds within the next few days."

"You expect to—what?" gasped the son.

His father stopped him with a look of thick serenity which he afterward visited upon me. "We know that Miss Alster is suffering from an incurable disease," he stated, "but you appear far too con-

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fident that she won't live long enough to make another will. I shall attend to that." He signed to his son to bring him his hat.

"You can save yourself all this trouble," I announced. "Miss Alster will never make another will."

"What!" he demanded, facing me, and then, unwillingly: "Why?"

I could keep the news no longer. "I have just been telephoned," I cried in a voice louder than I wanted it to be. "Miss Alster was found murdered in her room this morning."

And before either of them could think of a word to say, I walked triumphantly from the office.

II

I SECURED my hat and coat and hurried through the outer office without responding even to Miss Walsh's questioning look. Too late, I realized how she would have rejoiced at the news. But on me now was the additional agitation of one suddenly thrust into new authorities and the hope that in these I might so conduct myself as to secure the favor of Miss Beatrice Alster. It was she—and she alone—who occupied my mind to the exclusion of all others; and I hastened to her side with a nervousness that I was greatly put to it to subdue.

Miss Alster's late residence was on one of the streets in the seventies, just away from Madison and Fifth Avenues, a four-story brownstone front, not to be remarked from the twenty similar in the block except by its number. As I turned into the street I looked for a crowd before the door. There was no crowd. On the opposite side of the street were one or two groups of men engaged in conversation; as I approached the steps two men, idling

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there, looked me over, but apparently Miss Alster's death had not provoked the sensation I expected.

A policeman in uniform opened the door and stopped me rudely as I attempted to pass him.

"Reporter? Here, you! This don't go. See!" He stopped me with one arm while the other held to the door.

I explained, giving my name, my business, and the purpose of my visit, but he obstinately refused to permit me to pass until I identified myself by my card, by letters, by the initials in my hat and by the name tag in my clothes. Evidently he had been given strict orders to keep reporters at bay; and this—my first fury at my own delay gone—pleased me mightily.

A deathly silence reigned over the house. I could not make up my mind whether the slow, muffled footsteps that seemed to start up, stop, and start up again, now on this floor, now on the floor above, now at an indeterminable distance or nearness—I could not decide whether they were real or a fiction of my over-excited imagination. I stood dumbly in the front hall for a long time, hesitating, the dread of the house, of the dead upon me, a great fear of making some blunder or not showing sufficient con-

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trol and authority acting like paralysis upon me. A slight stir behind me broke the spell. I turned. The policeman stationed at the door was staring at me questioningly. After a hasty glance into the reception room at the right, which proved to be unoccupied, I went quietly upstairs.

Miss Alster had occupied that entire second floor and, doubtless, her body now lay in one of its rooms. I took a long breath as I observed that all the doors were closed. Softly, quickly over the padded carpet, past all these doors, I slipped, never stopping until my foot was on the next staircase and I had taken a firm hold of its banister.

Thud! Thud! Thud! As I paused to glance apprehensively back one of the doors opened. A pair of eyes fell straight and searchingly upon me. With a loosening of the heart I recognized that they were gray, that they were a man's eyes, that was all, then the door was closed.

Thud! Thud! Thud! Was it the muffled footsteps of this man that I heard without being able to locate? How could he have heard my quick, soft movements along that hall so as to open the door and look straight at me? With a shudder I slipped up the stairs.

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Here, as below, all the doors were closed. I had never been on this floor before. I stood undecided as to which room to turn. I listened and could make out nothing except that occasional thud, thud, thud, which seemed to seek me out through the dead silence and to beat on my head as on a muffled drum. I stood there in that upper hall waiting, listening, hoping for other sounds until my heart seemed to stop beating, then the door of the front room on the left opened and Agnes, Miss Alster's Irish maid-servant, stepped out.

Her usually calm face was flushed; she was so flustered that she failed to observe me; she closed the door and stood holding its handle as against some one chasing her, or at least as if against one whom she did not wish to follow her. And, when she finally looked up and noted my presence, she did so with a smothered exclamation of relief. Before I could speak she put a cautioning finger to her lips, listened a moment, and then led me to the room farthest away, closed the door and turned agitatedly toward me.

"'Tis a madhouse, a madhouse, a madhouse here to-day!" she exclaimed, hysterically wringing her hands. "The old fiend dead, God rest her soul, and

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the young fiend loose and carrying on till we're all at our wits' ends, and not a man about to lean on! Oh, Mr. Swan, if you'd been through what I have this lovely morning!" She put her hand on my arm and seemed about to cry. "Not a friend in the world—for all their riches, not a friend in the world—it's a lesson to us—not a soul has been near them—everyone gone except me and Alice—could you blame me for leaving? Not a man around these two hours, except the policeman at the door, and me standing the brunt of it all—and me——" she choked off.

I took her by the arm and led her to a chair. I gave her a little time to control herself. Then I thought of the butler. "But where's Keith?" I asked her.

"The blackguard!" She forgot her woe in her resentment. "Where would he be the once we need him? Gone, like the bad rubbish I said he was. From the minute I first set eyes on that man I knew him for what he was, a villain if ever I saw one. If the old fiend had ever seen his carryings on with the young fiend as I have!"

"You mean with Miss Linda?" I asked amazed.

"Sure, 'twas scandalous! A butler making signs

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to her whenever he wanted to talk with her, whispering soft nothings into her silly young ears in this hall upstairs when he thought no one was watching, and then leaving like the sneak and the coward he is just when the young fiend needed him! What would you think of just the scrapings of a man like that?"

Keith, the butler, carrying on a surreptitious flirtation with Linda Alster! Headstrong as that pretty young woman was, I could not believe it. I set it down to Agnes's prejudice. I led her away from the subject by inquiring as to just how and at what time Miss Alster's body had been discovered.

"Sure, Mr. Swan, I've told that so many times already 'tis dead on my tongue. There was the doctor, the police, the man that's to buy the house, the——"

"The man that's to buy the house!"

"Either that or else he's a friend of the family or else—but didn't he tell me he had been sent for to look over the house, and haven't I run into him everywhere looking it over, counting the closets and trying the windows and the doors as if to cheapen it when we came to sell. And yet I liked

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the old duck; he acted like he knew his business, I'll say that for him, and he——"

"But Miss Alster never said anything about wanting to sell the house."

"The old fiend! Sure, and don't you know her? She was always surprising them she took close to her, not to say disappointing them. Take Miss Linda, see what she's made out of her. Taking one up like a nurse and dropping one like—like an empty tin can! Sure, I knew she would never come to any good end, God rest her soul!"

Gradually I got from her the details of how and when the body was discovered, though with many digressions not necessary to this story. It appeared that Miss Alster had been a martinet for having breakfast served at eight-thirty every morning and was always down herself a few minutes before that hour, making sure that her nieces and servants alike should be on time. At eight this morning Keith, the butler, not having appeared to prepare the table, Alice, the cook, went up to call him, Agnes refusing to do it. Alice came back with the news that his bed was empty and had not been slept in. The two maids debated the matter and agreed that neither cared to break the news to Miss Alster, be-

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cause Keith was one of her latest protégés and she would be furious. Eight-thirty arrived and Miss Alster had not come down. There had been some gossip between the maids as to how Miss Alster would take his absence, stopped suddenly by the entrance of the two nieces. They appeared as astonished at Keith's disappearance as the servants were. There were questions; the four women grew more and more alarmed as the minutes passed and Miss Alster also failed to come down. At last all four went up together and knocked at her door. There was no answer. They listened and could not hear her stirring. They tried the door and found it locked. Then they all fled downstairs.

Here they talked over in hushed whispers what might have happened until not one of them dared to go upstairs again. Finally Miss Beatrice telephoned for the family physician. He came with a locksmith and the women trooped upstairs behind them, Miss Beatrice in the lead. The locksmith opened the door, discovering the lights still to be burning wanly. He and the doctor led the way in, followed by all four women. Miss Alster was in her living-room, fully dressed, lying back in a chair as if she had fallen asleep. They spoke to her and

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she neither answered nor moved. The men went over to her, waving the women back, and screening her from their sight with their bodies. Then Miss Linda screamed. She had seen the pool of blood lying behind her aunt's chair.

According to Agnes, Linda had rushed screeching from the room, refusing to allow Beatrice to comfort or to come near her. Agnes followed her upstairs to her room, where Linda locked the door and declared that she never wanted to see Beatrice again. Beatrice knocked at the door and Linda called to her to go away, flew into one of those dry, hysterical tantrums that caused the servants to call her "the young fiend." She attempted to get her hat and coat and leave the house, but Agnes managed to prevent her by telling her that she would be arrested if she left before the coroner gave permission. Not until her passion wore itself out had Agnes been able to bring Beatrice and her together. And ever since——

"But I thought that Beatrice was the only one that could do anything with Linda when she had one of these fits," I objected.

"Sure, the devil in the old one has found a lodging in the young one. Since this morning she has

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that hate for Miss Beatrice that would do credit to the old fiend herself."

"Don't expect me to believe that Miss Alster really hated Beatrice!" I protested scornfully, rushing to Beatrice's defense.

"And what do outsiders like you know about the people of the house and how they feel toward each other?" Agnes crossed off my scorn with her own. "Have you never seen that Miss Linda has her fits and tantrums, but that Miss Beatrice is the one with a will of her own? Maylike you have never heard of all the attempts of the old fiend to break it? How would you, being new to the family and yet under the old fiend's spell?"

I had nothing to say. I thought better of my attempt to change her opinion.

Agnes rose from her chair, her anger that of a good servant whose word has been questioned. "Maylike you'll be saying those two girls is friends," she derided with a roused servant's contempt. "Maylike you'll be dreaming that this trouble has brought them together. Maylike you'll be denying that Miss Linda threw a book at my head, that she threatened to kill me if I stayed in the room." She flung open the door.

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In the hall outside stood a short, square-shouldered, slightly corpulent yet athletic-looking man of about forty-five. He had a massive, powerful-looking head with a good thatch of wavy hair and a short-cropped sandy mustache. He looked like a business man, a broker, or the executive of some big business downtown, who, having steered it to a prosperous destiny, was now concerned in finding a fitting home or investment for his money, and his eyes were fixed upon the ventilator high on the wall as if appraising its use and value. He completed his inspection before acknowledging our presence with a slow, negligent glance from his gray eyes.

Agnes nodded toward him to indicate that he was the man whom she had mentioned and appeared quite unconcerned that he should have been near while she was revealing family secrets. She turned back toward me and went on with the burden of her argument.

"Sure, sir, go in. Go in and see for yourself, if you don't believe me," she exclaimed. She pointed toward the room at the front of the hall and ran downstairs.

I hesitated. Agnes had convinced me that there

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was trouble between the two nieces. I had known them only a few weeks, had seen neither more than a half a dozen times, and gravely doubted my capacity for serving as a peacemaker. And yet if Beatrice needed aid! If I could only believe that my presence would not be an intrusion!

I heard Linda's voice raised in anger, and this prosperous-looking business man seemed interested neither in that nor in me, nor in anything except the mopboard and the doorframes in the hall.

"There's a closet and an open fireplace in that room, I presume?" he said finally, acknowledging me with a smile that I found peculiarly ingratiating; and then, with a good nature quite as winning, "Don't you think it would be better if you went in as the maid suggested?"

Before I could protest he took me by the arm, led me to the door, knocked, and, upon receiving permission, ushered me quietly into the room. I had a short view of him, smiling beneficently after me as he closed the door between us, and then I faced the dreaded duty before me.

It was as Agnes had declared. One glance sufficed to settle that. In chairs on opposite sides of the room sat Miss Alster's two pseudo nieces, their

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eyes avoiding each other. It was Beatrice who greeted me, holding out her hand without rising from her seat, and with a slight lightening of her lovely dark face that made my heart catch. Linda, her pretty blonde head supported by one hand, continued staring at the window, oblivious of me, conscious apparently only of some hot difference of which she still nursed the grievance.

"I—I don't intrude?" I couldn't help asking, looking, however, not at Linda but at Beatrice.

She shook her head. After a moment Linda turned around toward me as if I had addressed her, her blue eyes snapping.

"Not as long as you don't attempt to tell me what I ought to do," she said with a petulant toss of her head. She seemed about to say more, but stopped at a look from Beatrice.

"Remember, Linda! Remember your promise to me," warned Beatrice in a voice that trembled a little.

"I can be trusted quite as much as one I'm not naming," retorted Linda, and I saw Beatrice take the affront to herself, blush and become silent as if fearing to provoke her further.

I stood there, attempting to divert them from

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their difference by making some inane lead about the weather.

Suddenly Linda interrupted me in the midst of a sentence. "Beatrice says it is necessary for me to remain here to preserve appearances for her—is it?"

"Yes, but quite as much to preserve appearances for yourself." I stared at her in amazement.

"I don't care anything about appearances. I want to go. I want to leave this house and all its terrible people forever. I never want to see any of them again." She rose and ran to the window, pulled the drawn curtain aside and peeked out.

"You can't. You can't go until the coroner has given you permission without laying yourself open to suspicion."

"Suspicion? Suspicion of what?" She dropped the curtain and turned angrily toward me.

What could I say? I made a gesture threatening more than I cared to put in words and saw her eyes slowly leave me, travel to Beatrice and dwell upon her coldly. "Is that why you're staying, Beatrice, dear?" I heard her ask scornfully.

"Linda! Remember!" was Beatrice's only reply. Linda seemed thoroughly to enjoy her discom-

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future. She returned to her chair and her manner relaxed. "Do you know anything about the will?" she suddenly asked me.

"Linda, what does that matter?" interposed Beatrice.

"Everything to me, if you do pretend it doesn't to you," retorted Linda. "Oh, I'll keep my agreement with you now, no matter how the will reads, but there's one thing I must know. Oh, what a fool I am!" She whipped suddenly toward me. "Mr. Swan, you're a lawyer, tell me. If Beatrice solemnly promises to give me half what she inher——"

But that question was never finished. Beatrice had risen from her seat, crossed the room and stood glaring down into Linda's eyes with an intensity before which she quailed. Linda stopped talking, stared boldly back for a few moments, then shuddered and changed her seat. There was real fear in her action, though she sought to cover it with a hollow, ineffective laugh. And then came a knock on the door.

I turned. Had that door been ajar all the time since my entrance? Then it swung open and the man who had led me in ushered in a stalwart white-haired man with a white mustache and a distin-



“Beatrice had risen from her seat, crossed the room.”



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guished manner, whom I recognized instantly as General Alster. I had seen him often on the platform at political rallies and at public mass meetings where great reforms were agitated, but I had never dreamed that he was related to Miss Cornelia Alster as his first words indicated.

"I ventured to come here the moment I heard the sad news and the man outside insisted upon my coming right in," he stated. He advanced past me toward the girls, who had risen, forgetting their difference in their astonishment at seeing him. "Are you the children?" He gave them each a hand. "Why, you're quite as pretty near to as at a distance—both of you. Don't blush, I've seen you often in your aunt's box at the opera and wanted to meet you. Nothing except the absurdly strained relations between me and my cousin could have kept me away. But now——"

I looked at the door. It was closed tightiy. Probably it had been closed quite as tightly after my own entrance. I remained a few minutes, unnecessary, unnoticed and uncomfortable, watching the courtly old general making friends with the two girls, then, with murmured excuses, I slipped out of the room.

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The man whom I had suspected of eavesdropping was nowhere in sight and the noise in the lower hall told of the arrival of a number of people. I hurried downstairs to learn what this meant.

III

AS I turned down the last flight my eyes fell upon a great crowd of people in the lower hall. They were wedged into it like sardines and my first glance told me that they were not young and active enough to be reporters, as I had feared. As midway on the stairs I stood staring at them in perplexity, a man separated himself from them and made straight for me as if directed.

"I'm Coroner Halsperg, in charge of this case," he stated. "Can you tell me if the deceased is a relative of General Alster's?"

"She was a cousin, I believe," I responded.

"Ah, I thought so!" he exclaimed with satisfaction. "And I understand he is here. Will you arrange so that I may have a few words with him?"

I led him upstairs and called General Alster out into the hall. Wondering how a coroner's jury should have come upon this case with such celerity, I kept my ears open and obtained an explanation. Coroner Halsperg, it appeared, had been at the house earlier and left to take charge of a jury drawn

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for another inquest. He had thought to curry favor with General Alster by bringing the jury to sit on this case instead.

"Suicide? Well, I don't know. But I'll do the best I can for you, General," I heard him promise before he came hurrying down to call the jury upstairs to inspect the room in which Miss Alster's body had been found.

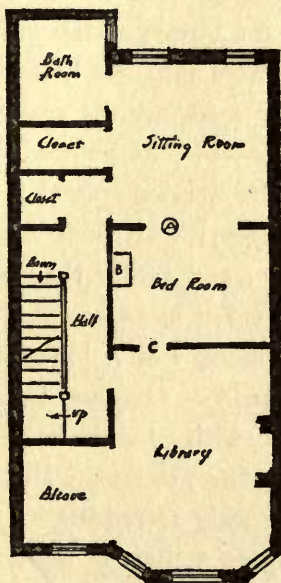
Over the banister in the hall above I watched the jury ascend. The members appeared to be citizens of much better standing than I had deemed likely to serve on a coroner's jury. I did not understand this until later, when it was explained to me that the coroners made a point of selecting citizens accustomed to social conditions somewhat similar to those of the deceased. I did not envy them their duty of inspecting the very room in which Miss Alster had met her death.

The rooms on that floor were arranged as is set forth in the plan on the next page.

I stood at the door after they had all poured into her living-room. Nothing could have induced me to pass through the door. In that room only this morning they had discovered that ghastly, feelingless form that never again could be forced to utter a

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single word, that could be mutilated without murmuring, that could be cut up without bleeding. On the bed in that adjacent chamber, separated from



A—Chair in which body of Miss Alster was found.

B—Dresser on which pistol was kept.

C—Door always kept locked and never used.

me only by a wall, lay the body, hearing but not speaking, seeing but pretending not to, knowing but not declaring. I shuddered. To keep my imagina-

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tion from bringing my flesh in actual contact with it, I listened to the coroner.

He was recapitulating in a quiet, inconsequential tone. "Windows all found shut and locked; that door there into the library found locked, key on this side; this door here into the hall also locked, had to be opened by a locksmith; and the body found here in this chair——" he pointed to the blotch on the carpet—"fully dressed; pistol at her feet. Any questions, gentlemen?" At their silence he led them away downstairs; and rather than be left alone on that floor, I crowded in among the jury.

Coroner Halsperg was a jovial-looking, matter-of-fact, business-like German-American, without imagination, yet with powers of observation that fitted him aptly for his task. In the dining-room downstairs he quickly seated his jury in a cluster at his left, drawing up a chair to the uncovered dining-table for himself. Then, having waved the witnesses and others to seats on the right, he rapped on the table and opened the inquest.

"Doctor Hayden," he called.

Doctor Hayden took his place at the other side of the table waiting, but the coroner appeared to delay for some reason.

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Suddenly in the wide double doorway opening between this room and the reception room in front appeared the man who had peered at me from the death chamber, who had later thrust me into the room where the girls had secluded themselves. He looked carelessly over the whole assemblage, appeared about to withdraw and take a seat in the other room, but at a nod and sign from the coroner advanced into the dining-room and established himself in a corner behind this official. I felt that something was explained. This man who had made himself so much at home about the house was apparently the coroner's assistant. And yet he seemed too well dressed to hold such an unimportant position.

"Now, Doctor Hayden, if you will tell us just what happened here this morning after you were called," ordered the coroner.

Doctor Hayden, a short, suave, handsome man just leaving middle age behind him, began at once, by giving his name, age and his address, which proved to be in the immediate neighborhood. "My valet had just finished shaving me and I was about to go down to breakfast when one of the maids in my house came running upstairs with the news that

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Miss Alster was locked in her room, couldn't be roused, and her nieces feared that something had happened to her. I hastened to the telephone, and from Miss Beatrice's alarm gathered that the women relied upon me to do all that was necessary. Getting into my motor, I found a locksmith and took him with me to the house. The four women—Miss Alster's two nieces, the maid-servant and the cook—were all gathered in the lower hall, not daring to venture upstairs. I did my best to relieve their worst fears by stating that probably Miss Alster was either more soundly asleep than usual or had experienced a mild shock. The locksmith and I proceeded upstairs with the four women trailing along. The locksmith opened the door without forcing it. We entered and saw Miss Alster sitting in a chair but a short distance from the door. She looked as if she might have fallen back in it asleep. The electric lights in the room were burning, though the morning was a bright one. I spoke to her and she did not move. The locksmith and I ran to her. At almost the same instant that I saw the wound in her neck one of the women must have seen the pool of blood behind her on the floor and screamed. We got the women out of the room.

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I made sure Miss Alster was dead and then sent the cook to telephone the police. While waiting for them to come the locksmith inspected the doors and windows and floor and I examined the wound, all without disturbing anything."

At the request of the coroner he described in technical terms the position of the wound and the course the bullet had taken. Translated from his Latin verbiage, it revealed that Miss Alster had died instantaneously from a bullet that had entered the back of her neck and followed an upward course into her brain. She had been dead, he judged, thirteen or fourteen hours.

The coroner here interrupted him for the first time. "Then the shot that caused her death must have been fired between nine and ten o'clock last night?"

"Yes, I should think so."

"From the position and condition of the wound would you say that it could have been self-inflicted?"

"W-ell," Doctor Hayden plainly hesitated, "y-es, it was possible."

"What makes you so doubtful?"

"Because the arm would have to be held in such a cramped and unnatural position to shoot one's

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self in the back of the neck——” He illustrated on himself——“but you see it is possible.”

“In case it was self-inflicted there would be powder marks about the wound, wouldn’t there?”

“Yes.”

“Did you discover any?”

“Yes.”

“That is why you think it may have been self-inflicted?”

“Yes, though powder marks can sometimes be made from a distance of three or four feet.”

The coroner seemed to observe at once the stress he laid on this last statement. He asked quickly: “You seem inclined to believe that more likely this wound was made by somebody else firing from that distance——why?”

“Because the powder marks were granulated and scattered. There was not the heavy smear they usually make when a shot is fired at such very close range.”

“Oh!” Coroner Halsperg made the exclamation involuntarily; he turned and his eyes sought those of the man seated in the corner behind him as if this testimony unexpectedly rendered credible some suspicions this man had presented to him.

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With a gesture that appeared to signify that he was not yet convinced, he went on.

"In your earlier testimony, Doctor Hayden, you said something about fearing that Miss Alster might have suffered a shock. Why did you think that?"

Doctor Hayden nodded. "Miss Alster was affected by a very dangerous lesion of the heart that might have caused partial or complete paralysis at any moment."

"Was she aware of this?"

"Yes, both I and the specialists whom I called in at her request thought best to tell her. She was a woman of considerable property and with varied interests; she might die in a flash at any instant without having time to put her affairs in order; she might even bring on the fatal seizure herself by unusual exertion or excitement; we decided on all these accounts it was better to inform her, though I myself too late regretted doing so."

"Regretted telling her that she was liable to go at any minute? Why?"

"She had a much more morbid disposition than I before realized." Doctor Hayden stopped and seemed averse to pursuing the inquiry further in this direction.

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"Go on," urged the coroner.

"W-ell, she brooded over the possibility. The thought that she might have no warning that her last minute was approaching had a disastrous effect. She——" Doctor Hayden stopped short; his lips closed firmly.

Coroner Halsperg waited patiently a moment for him to continue. Then he bent forward. "Doctor Hayden," he demanded severely, "did Miss Alster ever do anything or say anything that led you to fear that she might take her own life?"

"W-ell——"

"Doctor Hayden, the purposes of this inquiry demand that you should answer that question without quibbling or reservation."

Doctor Hayden flushed a little. "I have no desire to frustrate your purposes," he disclaimed. "Yes, I think I ought to admit that she expressed some such intention to me once or twice, but I gave little credit to it. I have heard so many people of her age who suffer from incurable diseases speak lightly of having such an intention that I had no belief that she would do it. I had a patient only last week who——"

The coroner made an impatient gesture. "Doc-

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tor Hayden," he interrupted, "are you aware whether she purchased the pistol found by her body with any such intention?"

"I am not."

"You don't know?"

"No."

"She never did anything more than to say that she preferred death by her own hand to the suspense?"

"I won't go so far as to say that. She once asked me, I remember, for the name of some poison that would be immediate and painless."

"Did you give her the name of any such poison?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because in her state of mind I considered it unwise that she should have any such drug at hand." Again Coroner Halsperg paused to direct a significant glance at the man in the corner behind him. This time his eye carried a look of triumph, as if he had developed testimony that furthered his own contention. The man in the corner met his eye, now as before unmoved, with a calm inexpressive look which denied that he considered himself the target for these glances.

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Coroner Halsperg seemed to take no offense. He turned back good-naturedly to his witness. "I shall only require you a few minutes longer, Doctor," he stated. He drew from his pocket two envelopes, one containing a bulky object. "After I first appeared here this morning, and at my direction, you probed for the bullet, did you not?"

"Yes."

"Is this it?" The coroner shoved across the table the smaller envelope of the two.

Doctor Hayden reached for the envelope, inspected his signature on it, unsealed the flap and answered: "Yes."

"How would you describe that bullet?"

"Ordinary .32 caliber, I should say."

"Yes. And this was the direct cause unquestionably of Miss Alster's death?"

"Unquestionably."

"And this was the pistol we found on the floor by her feet?" The coroner passed the other envelope across the table.

After examining the envelope and its contents, Doctor Hayden admitted as much.

Coroner Halsperg bent toward him. "Now immediately after you had secured the bullet—this .32

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caliber bullet—we examined the pistol together and what did we find it to be?”

“A Savage automatic .32 equipped with a Maxim silencer.”

“What else?”

“That it was loaded with eight cartridges and that the action was fouled.”

“Indicating that at least one shot had recently been fired from it?”

“Yes.”

“And we also found upon the floor the shell from one .32 caliber bullet?”

“Yes.”

“Then this bullet that you extracted from Miss Alster’s brain could have been fired from this pistol which we found at her feet?”

“Yes.”

“That is all.” Coroner Halsperg smiled. “Oh, one minute, please,” he called suddenly. “I forgot to ask you anything about this pistol. Do you happen to know from your own knowledge or hearsay how it came into Miss Alster’s possession?”

“Yes, I purchased it for her.”

“Ah!” Coroner Halsperg seemed surprised. “Recently?”

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"About a month ago."

"Did she give you any reason why she wanted it?"

"Yes, for protection against burglars. It was one of the natural symptoms of her morbid condition that one day she should talk of taking her life and the next day take every precaution to safeguard it."

"Where did she keep this pistol?"

"I have seen it a number of times lying on the top of the dresser in her bedroom. I don't know—yes, I should say that she kept it there most, if not all the time."

"Did she give you any reason for wanting a pistol equipped with a Maxim silencer?"

"No, but I understood. She was in a highly nervous condition. I took for granted that the very idea of noise of any kind was intolerable to her and the bare thought of a pistol shot—well, can't you see how she would take every step to escape such a nerve-racking sound as that?"

"You had no fear at all that she might want this pistol to carry out her fitful intention to take her own life?"

"No." Doctor Hayden flushed angrily. "If I

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had thought that I never should have secured it for her."

"That is all, Doctor Hayden." The coroner turned to the officer seated at his right. "Now, sergeant, we should like to hear from that locksmith," he stated. "I don't see him anywhere about the room."

The police sergeant rose, went over and whispered something to the coroner, who seemed displeased, but only for a moment. He consulted his watch.

"Oh, very well," he stated, "in that case I think we'll adjourn this inquest for luncheon. We'll meet again at—well, say three o'clock. That will give us time to get the locksmith and to notify the ladies that we shall require their testimony."

Coroner Halsperg rose and there was a general rising and movement to the door of the entire assemblage. As I entered the reception room at the front I was astonished to perceive General Alster sitting there on a divan where he must have heard all the testimony in the next room without being observed by any present. Doctor Hayden was seated beside him and talking animatedly as if arguing his own belief that Miss Alster had never committed sui-

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cide. I could not forbear passing near so as to hear what the doctor was saying.

"You unquestionably should do it," he was declaring. "I will stake my professional reputation that the police will never solve this mystery. Think, General, the patrolmen are chosen for their height, weight, and physical prowess only; if they possess any mental efficiency it is purely accidental; and the detectives are recruited from such a fine lot of animals. It isn't to be expected that they will have the mental fitness or intelligence to——"

But General Alster's eyes had fallen on me as I was passing. He rose, with apologies, and held out his hand to me.

"Mr. Swan, I believe." He introduced me to Doctor Hayden. "As the man who I have just learned will have the deciding power you should hear what the doctor has to say. He insists that we should employ a private detective on this case."

The doctor's eyes met mine; he, about to renew his argument, I, about to protest at undergoing such a needless expense; but we neither of us found opportunity just then to state our opinions, for Coroner Halsperg, espying General Alster, had broken

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through the crowd to shake hands with him, having evidently caught his last words.

"General," he interrupted hotly, "if you think of wasting your money putting any outside men on this case don't, for Heaven's sake, fall into the clutches of any of those dead-and-alive Hawkshaws. They'll simply soldier along, bleed you for all you'll stand for, and in the end have nothing whatever to show you. There are only a few good detectives among all the bad lot in that line. Don't go it blind. Let me suggest one to you."

General Alster nodded. "Yes, I agree with you. But there's one man who, if one can believe the newspapers, seems so head and shoulders above all the rest that there appears to be no choice. I mean _____"

"You mean Trask," interrupted Coroner Halsperg confidently.

"You can't mean anyone else," broke in Doctor Hayden.

"Yes," assented General Alster, "Trask was the man I had in mind, but——"

"Shall I call him?" asked Coroner Halsperg, turning sharply away from us to look over the outgoing crowd.

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"What! Do I understand he is here?" exclaimed General Alster.

"Coroner, you aren't having fun with us?" demanded Doctor Hayden.

"Trask here!" My own astonishment was as irrepressible as theirs.

"He was here a few minutes ago," responded Coroner Halsperg, too concerned in his search to pay attention to our bewilderment. "Ah, there he is! That short, thickset man over there working toward the door with the sergeant."

We all turned and looked with silent interest at this man who had made a national reputation for himself as a fathomer of subtle crimes and a runner-down of the adroitest criminals.

It was the man whom Agnes had taken for a real estate buyer. It was the man whom I had taken first for a business man and then for the coroner's assistant.

"Oh, I noticed him at the inquest, but——" Doctor Hayden decided against publishing his disappointment at the famous detective's appearance.

General Alster also seemed unimpressed. "I—I don't think we will bother to speak to him, not just now, anyway."

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Coroner Halsperg smiled, but said nothing.

I caught the drift of their feelings and voiced my own. "Why, he looks to me like an everyday sort of business man—the sort you see thousands of downtown—not a bit like a detective," I added.

"Well, that's not exactly what I should call a handicap—not for a detective," responded Coroner Halsperg dryly.

IV

THE interim between sessions General Alster and I spent mainly in the room on the third floor where the girls continued to seclude themselves. Beatrice, despite our protests, ordered Agnes to bring up a light luncheon. General Alster nibbled politely at it. Beatrice seemed too troubled to eat. I made only a pretense of playing with the food. But Linda, after first scorning them, finally ate quite a number of the sandwiches and cakes on the tray.

Though there were no further differences between the girls such as I had witnessed, they still sedulously avoided addressing each other; and General Alster's attempts to divert their minds and bring them together in general conversation failed utterly. After a time he desisted and called me to the other end of the room, where we talked over business matters in a low tone. He appeared to take for granted that I should at once take charge of everything—with his assistance, however. Young as I was and fresh to such important duties, he

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seemed to place implicit confidence in my honesty, ability and judgment. He asked me about the terms of the will; when he learned that I was named as the sole executor, he pledged his aid in securing the bond required; more important than this, he relieved my immediate worry by agreeing to transfer to me the following morning a large sum of money to meet expenses until the will should be probated and I would be empowered to collect money due the estate. Of course the money advanced was to be repaid to him later from the estate, but this action made it possible for me to cope at once with those demands of my new trust for which my own meager resources were utterly, not to say pathetically, inadequate. My heart lightened at his confidence. I told him as much warmly, and I made up my mind to listen humbly to all his suggestions and to deserve his faith by acting on them.

If he were conscious at this early stage of the strained relations between the two girls at the other end of that same room, he made not the slightest reference to it. He could hardly have missed noticing their moody silence, and he must have wondered at the pointed manner in which Linda addressed only us two men; but he carefully covered

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this with his own conversation and, though their obstinate silence made the time drag, we were finally all summoned downstairs to the inquest.

At General Alster's suggestion Beatrice and Linda seated themselves with him on the divan in the front room which he had previously occupied. There was room only for him and the two girls. After a moment's hesitation I left them and went into the dining-room, where all the other people had gathered. Coroner Halsperg was just taking his place at the further end of the dining-room table. I slipped into an inconspicuous seat in the nearest corner of the room and looked interestedly about for Trask. He was neither in the seat he had occupied at the morning session, nor elsewhere in that room so far as I could see. Wondering if the coroner could have informed him of our failure to be impressed by his looks, I was soon deeply interested in the testimony.

The session was full of surprises. Coroner Halsperg opened by calling for the locksmith. He failed to rise. Instead, the sergeant of police drew near and appeared to be proffering excuses. But these evidently failed to placate the wrath of the official in charge. Coroner Halsperg grew red of

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face and pounded on the table as he finally yelled, "You send a man for him. You bring him here by the scruff of his neck, if necessary," he ordered. And the sergeant, making the best of the situation with a surly grin, left the room for a few minutes, apparently to send an officer for the strangely recalcitrant witness.

This incident affected the doughty little coroner beyond all apparent reason. I have always noticed that officials in the lower positions are quick to take offense at the frustration of their plans or the slightest questioning of their authority. At any rate, Coroner Halsperg seemed in a fury that he took his time to control before starting the inquest again; and throughout the session he appeared inclined to take out his anger on the witnesses, manifesting at times a surly, snapping disposition quite the reverse of his unruffled bearing earlier in the day.

I was called as the first witness myself. I stumbled awkwardly to my place a little white, I knew, at feeling all eyes on me.

At the coroner's request I related what I had seen of Miss Alster the previous night. She had invited me to act as her escort to the opera. I reached the house at eight; we left together within five or

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ten minutes, arriving in her box after the curtain had risen on the first act of "Tristan und Isolde." Soon Miss Alster complained of not feeling well. Even before that act was over she requested me to get a taxi and take her home. I secured one. Just before it was about to turn into her street she beat on the window and signed for the chauffeur to draw up to the curb. She explained that she thought she would like to walk the rest of the way home. It was only half a block. She seemed unusually silent, moody and nervous, but I ascribed it to her indisposition. Going up the steps she handed me her latch-key and I observed that her hands trembled noticeably. I opened the door, she passed in without inviting me to come also, so I returned the key and closed the door between us. My last sight of her was as she hurried away upstairs. Then I walked to the corner and took a Madison Avenue car to my boarding house.

"That's all." The coroner did not ask me a question. He merely waved me disdainfully back to my seat.

Miss Alster had managed to get along with but three servants by securing unusually efficient ones and paying them wages above the average. Alice,

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the fat, good-natured colored cook, followed me as a witness. The coroner waved her aside as soon as she had told her story, just as he had me. In Agnes, however, he appeared to perceive a foe worthy of his mood. He plied her with questions about Keith, the missing butler.

"You say he must have left the house sometime early in the evening—how do you know that?" he demanded.

"Because I never saw him after he went upstairs, and this morning we found his bed had not been slept in."

"You have testified that Keith went upstairs about eight, that the cook followed at quarter past eight, and that you went up ten or fifteen minutes later. Now, when you went upstairs where were all the other people in the house?"

"I don't know."

"What? No lights in any of the rooms or sounds to tell you where the other three or four people were?"

"Well, there was someone in the library."

"That is the large room directly in front of the room where your mistress's body was found this morning?"

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"Yes, sir."

"How do you know there was someone in that room?"

"By the light and because someone was playing softly on the piano there."

The coroner seemed to perceive by the manner in which she snapped back this answer that he was on the trail of information that she was reluctant to give. "For no other reasons?" he demanded sharply.

"Well, I thought I heard two people talking in there but—but I guess I didn't," Agnes stammered.

"What makes you think you didn't?"

"Because the voices stopped the minute I started up the first flight and, anyway, one of the voices sounded like a man's."

"Ah, the voices stopped and someone began to play softly?" The coroner waited until she nodded assent. "Did you look into the library as you passed to see who was there?"

"No, I'll have you understand I'm no spy."

"No." Coroner Halsperg lost some of his own anger at hers. He went on more suavely. "But who must have been in that room at that time?"

"I told you I didn't know."

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"Someone was playing the piano—do both the young ladies play the piano?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you couldn't tell by that which one of them it may have been?"

"No, sir." Agnes had regained her former composure.

"Very well. But you thought you heard a man's voice. Couldn't that have been Keith's?"

"No, sir." Agnes's contempt bristled. "Miss Beatrice would never stand for having that man in the room with her."

"Oh, so it was Miss Beatrice who was in that room playing the piano?"

"Well——" Agnes paused in confusion, "well, it may or may not have been. I'm not saying. Sure she's a lady and has nothing to hide from you. She'll tell you if she was."

"Doubtless, but aren't you aware that you are giving things a bad look by not telling us frankly what you saw and heard and thought?"

"That's my fault, not hers. And I'm not that used to answering a blundering Dutchman's questions to have the right word ever on the tip of my tongue."

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"Well, forget that I'm a Dutchman—and that you're Irish," retorted the coroner testily. He frowned heavily. "And no more of this equivocation or——" he pointed threateningly toward the sergeant of police who had returned to his side. "Do you understand?"

Agnes blew her nose to hide her tears and nodded.

Coroner Halsperg allowed her a few minutes to recover control, then went on. "Those were the only lights or sounds you noticed in any of the rooms on the first or second floors?"

"Yes, sir," answered Agnes meekly.

"And your own room is on the fourth floor?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you observe any lights or sounds indicating that any of the other rooms were occupied as you went up?"

"There was a light showing under the door of Miss Linda's room."

"Then Miss Linda may have been in her own room last night about half past eight?"

"Yes, sir, that is, unless——"

But the coroner interrupted her ruthlessly. "Never mind about that. Miss Beatrice's room is

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on that same floor, isn't it? Was there any light in her room?"

"No, sir." Agnes looked behind as if she feared the admission might be a dangerous one.

"And on your own floor—what lights or sounds did you notice there?"

Agnes palpably took a long still breath of relief. "There was a light under the door of the cook's room, that was all."

"You saw no light, nor heard any sound from Keith's room on that floor?"

"No, sir, not a suspicion of one."

The coroner maintained a long silence while he thought, his eyes dwelling on everyone except the witness. Agnes grew restive under it. "Is that all, sir?" she asked hopefully at last.

"No. Go on."

"What more can I tell you, sir?" Agnes eyed him with alarm.

Coroner Halsperg squared round toward her. His voice became severe. "Everything. I want you to tell me everything else you saw and heard last night. Is there any reason why you don't want to do that?"

"N-o, sir."

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"Well, go on."

Agnes wiped her eyes. Her voice trembled a little at first as she continued. "Well, I went to my room—and I was that tired I got ready to go to bed at once—and—and just as I was putting out the light I thought I heard voices again, only this time they seemed to come from the room under me."

"From Miss Linda's room?"

"Yes, sir."

"Man's voice this time, too?"

"I—I thought as one was."

"Whose man's voice was it you thought you heard?"

"I don't know, sir." Agnes's response was quick and meek.

"Was it the same man's voice you thought you heard before?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Could you distinguish any of the words?"

"No, sir, just a dull sort of a mumble."

"And the other voice was a woman's?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you heard them through your closed door and the thick floor?"

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"Yes, sir—they seemed to be quarreling."

"Well, what did you do about it?"

Agnes seemed to be taken aback by the implication that she ought to have done something.

"Why—I—I just put out the light and got into bed."

"You weren't curious or interested?"

"No, sir, I thought it was none of my business."

"Well, go on. Did the sounds keep up?"

"Yes, sir, but I was that tired I fell asleep."

"Go on."

Agnes stiffened perceptibly; again she looked behind, this time as if imploring help; and, though her lips trembled, she said nothing.

"Go on," ordered the coroner implacably.

"Well," Agnes sighed deeply, "I couldn't have been asleep long before I was waked by a sound as if somebody was running upstairs. There seemed to be two of them and they stopped somewheres on the floor below. Then I heard the front door close and somebody else come running up two flights. Then there was hot words in the hall on the floor below me and the voice I heard sounded like mistress's."

"You mean like the late Miss Cornelia Alster's?"

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"Yes, sir. She seemed very angry. I lay for a time listening, but I couldn't make out a word. Then I got to thinking she must be in one of her crazy fits again and perhaps the young ladies might need help."

"Yes—well?" The coroner wearied of her long pause.

"At last I got up, went out in the hall just as quietly as I could, and looked down over the banister."

"What did you see?"

"Nothing, except the mistress running back downstairs again toward her own room."

"You saw or heard no one else whatever?"

"No, sir, not a living soul or sound."

"Then what did you do?"

"I went back to bed again."

"Why?"

"Because, quiet-like as I was, the mistress must have heard me. She looked up and caught me peeking down, and the look she gave me was that angry and fierce-like that I went about my business."

"Hem!" The coroner seemed to be convinced that she was telling the truth. "What time was this?" he asked after a pause.

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"I don't know, sir. I had been asleep and I didn't dare turn on my light again after the look the mistress gave me."

"And there were no sounds nor anything that would give you a clew to the time?"

"No, sir—oh, yes, sir. When I first woke up I thought I heard the old hall clock down here striking the hour, but I don't know what hour it was."

"No." Coroner Halsperg considered. "First you heard two people running upstairs to the floor on which the young ladies live, then you heard the front door close, then you heard someone else—one person this time—running up the two flights to the same floor—is that right?"

"Yes, sir, only this last one stopped for a time on the second floor and then came running up the other flight."

"If this was your mistress then, she may have stopped at either her own room or the library on that floor?"

"Yes, sir."

"You couldn't tell by the sounds at which?"

"No, sir."

"Very well, then, when you heard her talking

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loudly on the floor below, whose voice was it you heard answering her?"

"No one, sir, I told you that."

"Yes, so you did." Coroner Halsperg pretended to recall the fact. "But where did her voice sound as if she were standing on the floor below?"

"In the hall, sir."

"Yes, yes, but what part of the hall? The front or the back of the hall?"

"I couldn't tell, sir."

"Did it sound as if she were near Miss Beatrice's or Miss Linda's room?"

"I couldn't tell, sir, my door was closed."

"Of course not." Coroner Halsperg smiled ingratiatingly. "And when you ran out to go to the help of the young ladies you didn't see either of them. Yes, I recall that. But I forget which of their doors you saw open and the light coming through. Which of the young ladies' doors did you say that was?"

But evidently Agnes was keeping nothing back now and hence was not to be trapped. She looked at the coroner with a surprise too natural to have been put on. "I didn't see any open door or light, sir. The hall below was dark. I didn't see any-

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one but her. On my sainted mother, I can't help you to find who it was she was quarreling with."

And Coroner Halsperg after a long look at her gave up cross-examining her further.

V

I WAS deeply in love with Beatrice Alster. It was true that I had seen her no more than half a dozen times and always accidentally, when her aunt had called me to the house for consultation, but she was the first girl who had ever caught my eye for more than a moment, the first girl who had ever caused me that sudden reaching out of heart and hope that can be given no other name. I was deeply in love with her, and the wide difference between our stations in life made me an arrant coward about showing in the slightest way the nature of my feelings. One of my greatest hopes had been that the sudden elevation of my new position would place me on a footing where I should feel free to begin to show her my feeling, but as yet it had served only to increase my fears. The ominous character of Agnes's testimony sent my heart up into my throat. I shivered as Agnes ended and I realized that Beatrice might be the next one to face the coroner's cruel, subtle, entangling examination.

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My heart jumped painfully and beat fast as Coroner Halsperg after a dramatic pause drew his chair raspingly a little nearer the table, sat up rigidly and called her name. I felt the ruthlessness of his determination to batter down her reserve, to intrude upon any intimacies of thought or feeling that she might instinctively wish to keep from public view. And it was as if she herself dreaded the very same things. At his call she came slowly, reluctantly into the room, her tall straight young figure swaying timidly, a strange pallor on her long oval face, a humble, imploring look in her velvety brown eyes, but her lips set firmly. I have often thought that our mouths are the only features that we shape for ourselves, that we form by our inner feelings and by our disposition toward others. Her mouth—not that I can describe it satisfactorily in words—had always had a peculiarly soft and lovely expression to it, one that had belied the something like distance her beauty and reserve had invested her with, a gentleness, a kindness, perhaps, from which I took hope. But that inviting fullness of her red lips and the upward curve of the corners were gone as she faced the coroner. Her lips were indrawn, her mouth ran almost like a straight line across her

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face as if here in battle line she had drawn up all her resolution to face her inquisitor.

Coroner Halsperg was quick to observe this determination on her part and to take challenge from it. His small, buried eyes narrowed. He sat on the other side of the table silent, spearing her with a hard look, letting her stand unquestioned as if he knew that there is nothing like waiting for the issue to weaken the nerve for it. For what seemed like hours they remained staring at each other, at least two of us in that room suffering untold agonies, then I saw the coroner's eyes veer as at a sign. I followed them. General Alster had drawn the divan on which he and Linda sat into the opening between the two rooms. His eyes were directed on the coroner; for one minute they just slipped from him to Beatrice, then back again to the coroner. That look might have meant anything to others, but apparently it meant only one thing to Coroner Halsperg. He coughed, seemed disconcerted for a moment, then slumped back easily in his chair and the hard look left his face. His "Now, Miss Alster, if you will kindly tell us everything about last night that we ought to know, I shall be greatly obliged to you," was almost fawning.

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Beatrice started, her cheeks flushed and for a moment she stared at him uncertainly, but before she began the lovely look snuggled back again about her mouth.

"My aunt—she is really a much more distant relation, but she has always wanted me to call her that—left us soon after eight o'clock to attend the opera with Mr. Swan," she began in a low voice. "I had been out all the afternoon making calls and was feeling so fatigued that I went upstairs even before she left, intending to retire early. I made the mistake of stopping in the library, where I picked up a book. It wasn't very interesting, but my seat was so comfortable that I lingered on, skipping over its pages. I heard Mr. Swan arrive and leave for the opera with my aunt; I heard first the cook and then Agnes come upstairs; then I put my book aside, played on the piano for a few minutes and went up to my room. I am sorry—I am very sorry, but I fear this is all I can tell you. The terrible thing that happened to my aunt sometime in the night I was not aware of until——" her voice broke and she paused for a moment—"until this morning. And—and others have told you enough about that, haven't they?"

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Coroner Halsperg nodded. "Would you mind if I asked you a few necessary questions?" he asked after a pause.

"No." But her slim young figure stiffened ever so little.

"You were the lady in the library playing the piano when the maid went up to her room?"

"Yes."

"You were alone?"

"Yes."

"You heard her testify that she thought she heard a man's voice in that room as she started up the stairs?"

"Yes."

"You desire to contradict that testimony?"

"Yes."

"Can you account in any way for that idea, notion, belief or whatever you want to call it on her part?"

"No, unless——"

"Unless what? We should be very glad to have the aid of any explanation."

"Unless—unless she absolutely imagined it."

Coroner Halsperg seemed grieved. He waited a few moments, alternately looking at her and then

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at his notes which he shifted uneasily about before him on the table. At last he pushed on.

"Miss Alster's other niece, Miss Linda, she was not in the library with you at that time?"

"No."

"Can you tell us where she was?"

"She went upstairs before I did, directly to her room."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

The coroner lifted his eyebrows and paused another moment, but again went on, imperturbable, good-natured. "You say you heard the cook and the maid go upstairs to their rooms—did you hear the butler, Keith?"

"No."

"Or come down?"

"No."

"You heard or saw nothing of him that night?"

"Not——" Beatrice hesitated, her eyes for the first time dropped before those of her inquisitor—"not after leaving the dining-room," she finished firmly.

"Why——" but the coroner refrained from asking her why she hesitated as he had in the case of

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Agnes. Instead he shuffled his papers a moment, the while he made up his mind as to his next question. "Can you tell us at what time or about what time you went upstairs from the library to your own room?"

"At about nine o'clock, I think."

"You went upstairs alone?"

"Yes."

"There was no one else on the stairs with you at that time?"

"No."

The coroner looked baffled. "You heard the maid say she heard two people going up those stairs at that time?"

"Yes."

"But you say you were alone?"

"Yes."

"Can you tell us of any other movements or sounds that would have led her to believe there were two?"

"I cannot."

Coroner Halsperg shook his head; his eyes roved to General Alster's; he sighed before he continued:

"You yourself heard no man's voice on your floor, on the floor above, or in any part of this

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house after your aunt had departed with Mr. Swan?"

"No."

"Was the maid wrong also about your aunt coming up to your floor after she arrived home and talking to someone unknown in the hall?"

"No. She was right about that."

"Ah!" Coroner Halsperg breathed a sigh of relief and straightened up. "With whom was she talking?"

"With me."

"With you!" The coroner's astonishment voiced that of everyone else in the room. "You and your aunt were alone in the hall together?" he asked as soon as he recovered.

"Yes."

"You talked together for some time?"

"No, only for a few minutes."

"Your aunt's voice was raised?"

"Y-es." Beatrice's voice trembled a little, but the firm look began to reappear about her mouth as if she realized where his questions were leading.

"It was raised sufficiently to make others believe that you might be quarreling?"

"Yes." Beatrice dropped her eyes again.

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"Can you tell us, please, what the quarrel was about?"

"No." Beatrice's lips were a thin, firm line again and she looked the coroner straight in the eye.

"Why not?" The question came from the coroner's lips quick as a shot; habit had got the better of him.

Beatrice quivered at its sharpness, she quailed a moment before the sternness of his look, then her hand went to her heart and her voice broke. "Because—because it has nothing to do with this inquiry—because it was over something personal and intimate between me and my aunt—because no one on this earth has a right to ask me that question—because——"

I was too late. She swayed on her feet. I rose, but before I could get to her, General Alster was at her side, had taken one of her arms in his and was steadying her with the other.

For a moment naught was heard except the words of comfort being whispered into her ear by the white-haired, agitated military man at her side. Everyone else stared and gaped at them appalled. Then General Alster looked toward the coroner.

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"Will it be necessary to ask this young woman any more questions?" he demanded sternly.

Coroner Halsperg winced. "No, not unless the jury feel the need of asking her some," he replied, looking at them and shrugging his shoulders.

All eyes turned toward the jury. Their eyes were on Beatrice and I thought I saw sympathy for her in all of them. They seemed to be ashamed to be caught manifesting such feeling. They stirred uncomfortably; they began to nudge each other; then one after another they silently shook their heads. General Alster led Beatrice into the next room and I breathed a sigh of relief so deep that I wondered why it did not draw attention to me. I looked nervously about. I was relieved to find that nobody noticed it.

General Alster returned to his seat beside Linda within a few minutes. Alarmed that he should have left Beatrice alone, I rose from my seat and moved over to the door between the rooms to offer her my company. In the reception room in front she sat in one of the great chairs, her eyes tearless, staring hard at the floor, but apparently not desiring the companionship even of the man bending toward her. I waited until I made out who it was.

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It was Trask. He was evidently attempting to console her. I thought better of him as I returned to my seat.

It may have been my prejudice against her because she had not flown to the aid of Beatrice; it may have been because, after tragic moments, our natures force a light, trivial or comic aspect on the next ones, I don't know which, but to this day I recall the appearance of Linda on the stand as something trifling, careless, almost contemptuous. With her short, well-rounded figure, her blue eyes and flaxen hair, she was of the type that most men find captivating, but never I. She was a born coquette if I ever saw one, and she made use of all her arts to escape the ordeal through which Beatrice had just been. Perhaps Coroner Halsperg fell before them, as it was obvious that all the others in the room did, except me; perhaps, after the experience he had just had, Coroner Halsperg was loath to face just such another one; at any rate, he allowed Linda to tell her own story and he asked her but few questions.

Linda stated that she went to her room immediately after dinner and did not leave it until the next morning. She had been reading one of the ro-

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mantic best sellers just secured from the Fiction Library, and she declared that she had heard none of the sounds mentioned by the others. Not until the coroner questioned her definitely on that point, did she admit that she was conscious even of her aunt's visit to their floor after her return from the opera, and her information upon this was slight. She had noticed that her aunt had come upstairs and was evidently having words with someone, but apparently her novel had interested her much more than the excitement just outside her door. She had not even risen to open it. From her account, she had not left her room after she had once gone up to it until the next morning.

"And you saw nothing of Keith, the butler, that night?" inquired the coroner with a smile.

"I saw nothing of Keith after I left the dining-room," she replied promptly.

"Nor heard anything of him?"

"I suppose it was perfectly dreadful of me to be so interested in a novel," she answered with a coquettish little flick of her head to one side, "but really and truly I didn't hear anyone, not the tiniest sound after I once shut myself up in my room."

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"Not the sound of any man's voice?" asked the coroner with a lightness provoked by hers.

"I am sure I should have heard one if there had been one," she returned with a glance.

The coroner let her off smilingly, without further questions. But the light look left his face as he returned to his papers. He frowned; he scraped back his chair noisily upon the floor and consulted his watch.

"Sergeant," he exclaimed, "you'll be walking the pavements again if that locksmith isn't here within five minutes. He's the only witness remaining to be examined, and I told you to have him here by three o'clock. Five minutes, or a call to headquarters for you!" He announced aggressively.

The sergeant sprang to his feet. "It isn't my fault, coroner," he declared surlily, but he hurried out of the room.

He must have encountered his subordinate with the locksmith at the door, for it seemed barely a moment before the locksmith was brought into the room with a policeman on either side of him.

The locksmith was a short, frail little man with glittering shoe-button eyes. He had thick, matted black hair and a scraggly dark beard; he had evi-

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dently been drinking, for he was heedless of the delay he had occasioned.

"Here, you—you nearly cost me a call to headquarters by overstaying your leave. Now suppose you set me right with the coroner," whispered the sergeant, giving him a furtive shove.

But the locksmith took no offense at his rough treatment; he merely grinned placidly into the angry eyes of the coroner and raised his hand with a movement that was intended to be impressive, but which because of his diminutive aspect was essentially ludicrous.

"Well, what have you got to say for yourself?" snapped Coroner Halsperg.

"It's a boy, coroner." Again that impressive, ludicrous gesture.

"What!"

The locksmith straightened himself up to all his five feet one; he met the coroner's baleful gaze with a little less assurance, yet enough. "I—I say it's a boy," he repeated; and then, as the coroner still stared at him, "my wife—I couldn't leave her at the hospital any sooner. It isn't their fault; it isn't mine; and anyway, it's a boy!"

The coroner had to rap on the table to quell the

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titters that went around the room. He managed to keep his own face grave, but there was a twinkle in his eyes as he glared at the proud little father.

"Well, if it had been a girl, I don't know what we'd have done to you," he growled, and had to silence more amusement in the jury. "Hurry up, now, and tell us your story," he directed, as soon as he had restored order. He evidently expected no evidence of further importance, for he began to gather up his papers.

But the little locksmith, instead of beginning to tell what had happened when he came to the house that morning, became busy searching through his pockets, and his manner was troubled.

"I know I oughter've told some of you about this," he mumbled, "but I was so excited. I hope you won't hold it up against me." With a wrench he finally extricated what he was searching for from one of his pockets and pushed it timidly across the table toward the coroner.

It was a key.

"What's this?" demanded the coroner.

"It's the key, the key to the room where the body was found," replied the locksmith shrinkingly. "I know I oughter've given it up or spoken about it

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before leaving, but I was so excited—I hope you won't be too hard on me for it, Coroner."

Coroner Halsperg reached half way across the table toward the key, then suddenly he allowed it to lie where it was and straightened up. "But—but I thought you had to pick the lock to get into that room," he stormed.

"I did—I did!"

"Then where in the devil did you get this key?"

The little locksmith seemed to realize for the first time that his part in these proceedings was of even more dramatic consequence than he had feared. His face became sober; he bent across the table toward the coroner. "There wasn't any key in the lock of that door when I picked it," he declared in a voice so excited that it squeaked. "There wasn't any key on the floor inside or out. I know that because I looked. But after we had put the four women out, I happened to look and there was the key back in the inside of the lock. In the one or two minutes between finding the body and putting the women out of the room, someone slipped this key back into the lock."

Alice, the colored cook, Agnes, the housemaid, Beatrice and Linda, each one was recalled to the

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stand, but not one of them confessed either to having seen the key or to having noticed anyone putting it back where it should have been if Miss Cornelia Alster had locked the door of her own room after retiring to it for the night.

VI

THE coroner ordered the doors between the two rooms closed in order that the jury might go into executive session in the dining-room. General Alster immediately joined Beatrice, and before the other witnesses entered he was escorting her from the reception room. At a sign from him, I followed with Linda.

Linda seemed not in the least affected by her aunt's death and the ordeal of the preliminary investigation that we had just passed through. Her natural coquetry of look, manner, and words was as evident as ever; it appeared in the glance she gave me as I started across the room toward her, in the manner in which she leaned upon my arm as I led her away, and in her first words.

"Do you think it will be necessary for me to wear mourning?" she asked me, carefully lowering her voice so that no one else should hear.

"I think it would be better—for a time at least," I replied, covering as best I could my irritation that

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she should ask so light a question at so grave a time.

"I won't mind, if I find I look well in it," she announced with a slight pressure upon my arm and a look meant to be provocative.

We had reached the foot of the stairs. Above we could hear General Alster and Beatrice already ascending the second flight. They were not saying a word to each other.

I stood aside for Linda to lead the way. The stairway was wide enough for us to walk up side by side, but I thought to follow behind her and thus avoid further confidences. Until to-day Linda's trifling manner and words had but amused me; after witnessing her recent treatment of Beatrice I found her coquetries embarrassing. She advanced up the steps so slowly that I, following, found myself frequently on the next step below. Thus, half way up that flight, when she suddenly stopped and turned, our heads were on a level.

"General Alster is an old dear, isn't he?" she demanded, the pupils of her blue eyes making a sortie on me from their corners. "He has invited me to go home with him to-night."

The emphasis on the "me" was significant, but I

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held back for a time the question on the tip of my tongue and asked instead, "Are you going?"

"Yes."

"Is Miss Beatrice going, too?" I asked now.

"No." After a look she moved on up the stairs. She must have discerned my disappointment, for a few steps higher, without stopping, she flashed back another arch look at me and shot, "You like Bee a great deal more than you do me, don't you?" Then she ran on.

Without increasing my pace I was upon her again as we started up the next flight, but my mind had sunk to heavier things than her light talk and manner, astounding as these seemed in this house on that day.

"You take it as seriously as though you were one of the heirs. You might at least appear to be listening to my questions!" she exclaimed as we reached the next floor.

I looked at her with blank surprise. Had she really been asking me further questions as we went up that last flight? She opened the door of her own room, accepted my murmured apologies with a toss of her head, and entered her room, leaving the door open.

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I stood in the hall outside looking perplexedly after her. Had she told me the truth? Had General Alster misinterpreted Beatrice's testimony? Had he invited Linda alone to accompany him to his home? It seemed incredible that he could have put such an affront upon Beatrice. Was it possible that he suspected her of being in any way whatever responsible for her aunt's death? He must, or——

The opening and closing of the door of Beatrice's room interrupted my thoughts, but I regarded General Alster with quite different feelings from those I had held for him before. He came along the hall, evidently quite unconscious of the change in my attitude.

"I think it would be well if we chose this time for a conference," he announced. "Will you come down into the library with me?"

I noticed with a further sense of outrage that he carefully closed the door behind us. "There are several things that we must settle before I leave," he stated, motioning me to a seat but remaining standing himself. "I don't know how long you have known my late cousin, nor how familiar you are with her desires, but I have talked with the

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children and they have left a doubt in my mind as to my cousin's wishes. Miss Beatrice says that my cousin always had a horror of being buried alive and even of being buried in the ground, that again and again she has heard her express a wish that her body might be incinerated; but Miss Linda affirms with a great deal of emphasis that she never heard her aunt express any such wish, and that she is very confident that her aunt preferred to be buried in the old way. Can you throw any light on this question?"

"I think that Miss Alster would have wanted to be buried in the modern, scientific manner," I declared.

General Alster nodded. "So do I," he agreed. "And since we are together on that point I think I shall take it upon myself to stop at the undertaker's on my way home and instruct him to remove the body at once."

"He can't remove the body until the coroner has issued a burial permit," I blurted.

"There will be no trouble about that. And that body must not remain in this house to-night," responded General Alster quietly but firmly.

"Why not?"

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"Because Miss Beatrice intends to remain here," he stated, again fixing his eyes upon me.

I felt my face flushing under his inspection, but I nodded.

"Now, another thing." To my great relief he withdrew his eyes. "Even with the body gone, I do not feel easy about leaving her here alone, with none except the servants about."

"No, I shouldn't think you would."

"There should be a man here," he went on, overlooking my fling at him, "in case—well in case of anything. And the matter to be settled now is whether you can be that man."

Stay here! Stay overnight in this house where—In spite of myself I shuddered. Between my shoulder blades I felt the touch of ice; it melted and cold water ran down my spine. My silence brought General Alster's eyes back upon me again. Something in his look forced my courage. "Y-es, I'll stay," I managed to say.

He was still looking at me and seemed on the point of asking me for an explanation. Before he could do so, my former resentment swept back upon me.

"General Alster," I exclaimed, "you are doing

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one young woman a grave injustice by the suspicions you are indulging against her."

"One young woman! Which one?" he demanded.

"Miss Beatrice."

"I wondered what had caused this change in you!" General Alster stared at me for a long time before going on coldly, "Young man, do you know that you yourself are the first one to cast any suspicion on her? Do you realize that this is precisely what you have done by saying what you just have?"

"You invited Miss Linda to your home and left Miss Beatrice here—I'd like to know what that shows," I retorted hotly.

He smiled. "Only because Miss Beatrice declined the same invitation and preferred to remain here."

"What!"

"Who planted that scandalous notion in your silly young head?"

But a knock at the door saved me from the need of answering and also gave me time to recover from my confusion.

It was the coroner. He advanced and placed a paper in General Alster's hand. "There's the

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burial permit, General," he stated. He turned and crossed back to the door. "I hope we have been as expeditious as you expected us to be," he said.

"Assuredly. But—but what about the verdict?"

"That, I am sorry to say, may not be quite as you would have it, but it was the best I could do with the jury."

"What was it?"

Coroner Halsperg read from a paper that he held in his hand: "We find that the deceased died from the effect of a bullet wound, the weapon from which the bullet was fired being at the time in the hands of herself or of a person unknown to us."

General Alster started. "That could be taken either way. I've had a feeling from the first that my cousin committed suicide," he remonstrated.

Coroner Halsperg made a gesture. "You heard only part of the testimony unless I am mistaken."

"You consider this a fair verdict in the light of all the evidence?"

"Eminently fair. It was a concession that the jury allowed the possibility of suicide."

General Alster pushed back a white lock from his brow and sighed. "Knowing her as I did——" he mused. He stopped. "This means a lot of

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scareheads and notoriety in the newspapers, doesn't it, Coroner?" he objected.

"Yes. I don't see how that can be avoided."

"It can't be stopped? You can't think of any way to stop it?"

"No, the more you try to stop it the worse it will be."

"And it will bring down on us the police, detectives, the district attorney and all that, I suppose."

"Yes. I'm sorry." Coroner Halsperg unquestionably was.

"Lord, I wish I knew of some way to escape it for the sake of the girls!" General Alster strode away toward the front of the room. It was the first time he had shown any agitation. "Can't you—can't you tell me of some way?" he demanded querulously.

"I'm afraid you wouldn't follow my advice."

"How do you know? What is it? Out with it, man!"

"Well——" Coroner Halsperg hesitated, "if you make any further mystery of it, if you show no intention of investigating the suspicious things thrown up by the inquest, every newspaper in this city will put its best reporters on, and it will be a

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front page story for a number of days, perhaps for a week, at least for so long as the imaginations of these skilled reporters can keep busy on it."

"But no outsiders, no reporters were present."

"No, but the jury was, and it heard everything, and God has never made a jury yet that the reporters couldn't find a way to get at and get the news from."

General Alster sighed. "Yes, yes, I suppose that's so. But you said something about some advice."

"Shall I give it to you?"

"Yes."

"Well, open the door and let the reporters in. Let them prowl about this house just as much as they please. Cut out this air of mystery which is bait for them. If you don't care to meet their questions yourself, state that you have put detectives on it yourself, and, in order not to interfere with their thorough investigation, you have yourself agreed to say nothing for publication. Do that and in one day this will drop from a first page story with scareheads to a paragraph or two on an inside page."

"You mean?"

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"I mean that if you don't handle this matter conventionally and put your own detectives on it, the newspapers will scent something hidden and put their sleuths on it. And that—well, I don't need to tell you what that means, do I?"

"No." General Alster nodded somberly. "You're right. I'll do as you suggest. Thank you. Good-bye." He shook the departing coroner's hand.

"Well, I suppose we've got to do it," General Alster lamented, stopping before me on his way back from the door.

"It seems the wisest thing," I agreed with even more reluctance.

"I wonder, I wonder——" he looked at me.

"You wonder what, sir?"

"I wonder if that man Trask is in the house still. If we must have a detective, why not secure one at once and turn over to him all the business of handling reporters and so forth?"

I nodded.

"Do you mind going downstairs, seeing if he is still there, and asking him to step up here for a few minutes?"

I was already at the door and about to leave the room when a sudden exclamation from General

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Alster caused me hastily to turn about. He was staring toward the dimly lighted alcove to the library and was palpably astounded at what he saw. I followed his look. In this recess to the left of the piano was a huge high-backed chair from which a man who must have been present throughout our entire interview had just risen and was regarding me calmly. The man was Trask.

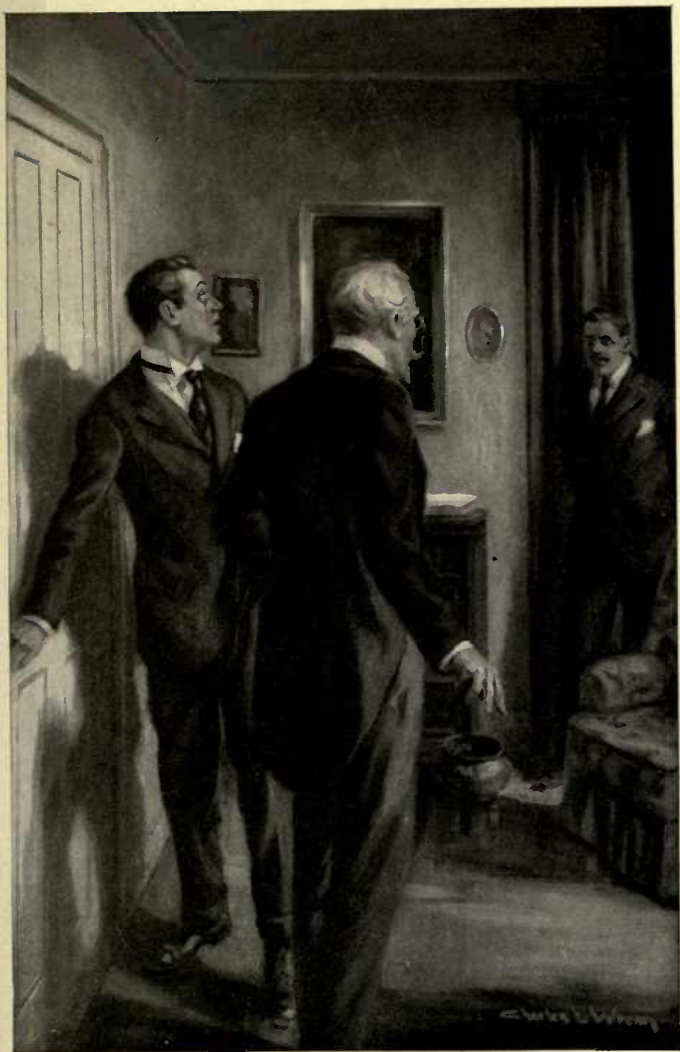
"I owe you my apologies for—for being discovered," he said easily. "I happened to be in here making a little investigation of my own and I was so deeply interested in something I found that you had shut me in with you before I noticed. After that—well, I confess what you had to say to each other interested me enough for me to keep quiet."

"You don't seem the least embarrassed at being found eavesdropping." General Alster looked at him with astonishment.

"No, I'm a detective," responded Trask calmly.

"Ah! You feel that excuses you?"

"Certainly. It's as much my business to learn every single thing that may be useful to me in solving a case as it is your business to inquire into the references and gossip regarding anybody who wishes to lease one of your buildings. I might mus-



"A sudden exclamation from General Alster caused me hastily to turn about."

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ter up a little false shame, if you demand it of me, but it will be all pretense, believe me."

There was no answer to this simple but precise statement. General Alster smiled in spite of himself.

"Also," Trask advanced toward him, "having been an interested auditor of all that has been said, we all of us are saved much time. I presume you have made up your mind to follow the coroner's advice?"

"Yes, if you agree with it."

Trask nodded. "I do, and I know just what you wish and how best to do it." Trask moved toward the door as if he intended to act on it at once.

"You need no further instructions? There is nothing else you wish to consult us about?" General Alster regarded him with satisfaction.

"Not a thing. I've overheard what you had to say, and caught your wishes a hundred times better than if you had endeavored to tell them to me. I was about to go down and attend to the reporters. On second thought, I guess it would be better if I put off that duty until you and Miss Linda go. As you leave the house the reporters will intercept you.

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All you need say is that you have given orders to open the house to them and left me to answer their questions. I stand well with them. That will be enough to save you a lot of trouble, both here and at your own house after you get there."

"That's true!" General Alster nodded his assent vigorously. "And I'll take advantage of your presence by getting away home with Miss Linda at once." He turned toward the door, but stopped. "But there's one thing about you quite as amazing as all the rest, Mr. Trask, and, well, a trifle less businesslike perhaps than your other actions. You haven't yet even asked for my authority to start in on this case."

"No." Trask smiled. "But only because I had already received orders the first thing this morning."

"Oh, I beg your pardon." After a short look of surprise at me General Alster left the room.

Not until General Alster and Linda had gone and Trask had attended to the reporters, did I have an opportunity to ask him the questions this talk had roused in my mind. I was still waiting in the library when the door opened quietly and Trask entered. He said not a word, but returned to the

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alcove where he had been discovered and seemed intently engaged on hands and knees in going over every inch of the floor in that vicinity.

I went over and joined him. "You said you found something here that interested you?" I ventured.

"Yes, I found something that virtually proves that there was another person in this room last night beside Miss Beatrice, as the maid, Agnes, testified," he replied.

My jaw dropped. "Do you mind showing me just what it was?" I asked him.

"No." Trask rose to his feet. "Here is presumptive evidence enough for me." He drew from his pocket a much folded surface-car transfer and handed it to me.

I unfolded and examined it. "I don't see how this proves what you say," I protested.

"Look at the date: yesterday. Look at the time punched: 10 P. M. Now——"

"Precisely! Ten P. M.," I interrupted, "and that very fact disproves that anyone could have left this here between eight and nine last night before Miss Alster returned home."

"No," Trask corrected me calmly. "You for-

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get. The time limit punched on a transfer is two hours later than when it is given out, so that there may be plenty of time to use it on other lines before it expires. Now this transfer, you will notice, was given to someone riding south on the Madison Avenue line which runs by the end of this street. Neither of the coupons has been detached. Consequently it must have been given to someone coming in this direction from further uptown and dropped by him later in this room. By whom? By some stranger probably, whose voice Agnes heard in this room about 8:30 as she went upstairs. By the way, do you notice anything else about it?"

I studied it for a time blankly before shaking my head.

"Well, it has been folded this way and that way as if the man given it had no further use for it, also as if he were exceedingly nervous over the outcome of his visit here. And he doubtless was so surprised by the unexpected return of Miss Alster that he dropped it on the floor where I found it."

"You're too sure that this was left here last night," I objected, dismayed at the way his hunt was tending. "Why couldn't I have dropped it here to-day?"

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"You?" He did not bother even to look at me. "Why you testified that between eight and nine last night you were going to and from the opera in taxis. You didn't perjure yourself, did you?"

I had nothing to say. His memory evidently was a fishhook for details. It was several minutes before I made up my mind to ask him my other question. "You told General Alster you had orders to start on this case this morning," I said. "General Alster looked at me as if he thought I ordered you to, but I didn't. Do you mind telling me from whom you got your orders?"

Without removing his eyes from the carpet over which they were traveling, Trask drew a sheet of note-paper from his pocket; without looking at this, he handed it to me. I opened it and read:

Will you oblige me by reporting at my house the first thing in the morning in person prepared to undertake the investigation you will find ready for you? It is of the utmost importance. I trust you will not fail me, but come yourself.

Even before I came to the signature I knew who had prepared that note. Miss Cornelia Alster had written it, and the date showed that she had done

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so on the previous day, on the very day on which she had met her death. The first shock with which I had read it subsided and was succeeded by a feeling of relief. She had forecasted her own death. She had rendered plausible now but one theory, that she had taken her own life. And Beatrice—no further suspicion could attach to her.

VII

I CAREFULLY folded that important note and held it out to Trask. Though his back was still toward me, he seemed instantly aware of my action. Still without looking at me his hand came straight to it, received it, and deposited it in his pocket.

"I veritably believe you have eyes in the back of your head," I accused him.

He chuckled. "Ears are so much more serviceable than eyes," he responded.

"You are the only one I ever heard say that. Why?"

"They can observe almost as much as any pair of eyes, however keen, and they have the great advantage of not betraying what one feels or thinks about things."

"Yes, now that you mention it," I agreed, "eyes do give away thoughts and feelings a lot, don't they?"

"That's the general belief," he chuckled. "But evidently you haven't heard the most modern scien-

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tific theory about that. Modern science says that the pupil of the eye and the eye itself express little or no feeling or intelligence, that all this really comes from the involuntary action of the many little muscles of the face." He turned suddenly and looked at me. "For instance, at this moment your eyes are opened a trifle wider than usual, your lips have parted, your eyebrows have gone up. All these are muscular changes of the face and yet anyone would say your eyes were showing surprise, though these have changed little if any at all. How much there is behind this theory I have never bothered to make sure, but, long before I heard it, I practiced keeping my back to every one and my face to myself. The back and profile give one away quite enough, but the full face and eyes and mouth—well, in my profession, it is wise to afford others just as few clues to your thoughts and feelings as possible."

He had turned away after reading my face in a single quick glance. "Does your turning away mean that you suspect even me?" I demanded jocularly.

"I suspect everyone until he is proved guiltless," he replied promptly. "There's a precious lot of theoretic tommyrot about the presumption of inno-

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cence, and how little the police and the men of my profession live up to it. But if you'll really consider that question a moment, you'll realize that the speediest way of solving a crime is to view the likeliest ones as guilty until each is cleared. Suppose you consider everyone innocent, where are you to make your start? No, believe everyone possible guilty and then set to work to establish each one's guilt or innocence—that's the only practical method of solving a crime, and that is precisely why that practice is in vogue. I've taken all this bother to present these opinions to you because I realize that sooner or later we are likely to wrangle over this very question."

I guessed what he was tending toward. He had overheard, he had learned how deeply interested I was in Beatrice, and was warning me not to interfere with his investigation in that direction.

"But—but don't you see that Miss Alster's letter to you proves absolutely that she committed suicide and makes anything more than a perfunctory investigation on your part unnecessary?" I demanded.

He shook his head. "No," he stated firmly, "why should she send for me, if she intended to commit suicide? Unanswerable, isn't it? I predict that

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we shall find that Miss Alster sent for me to uncover something about Keith, the butler, who has taken to his heels. Yes, either Keith or—but that is sheer conjecture as yet. However, as regards the question of suicide, I examined the wound carefully. The character of the powder marks showed conclusively that the pistol must have been held at least three feet away from her head. And I don't think I need to demonstrate to you that she could not possibly hold that pistol three feet away from her and lodge a shot in the back of her neck. No, the idea of suicide, as the doctor indicated, is out of the question. Miss Alster was murdered. That's the point we start from. Not by any burglar, because nothing is missing. Whether by some member of this household or someone outside cannot yet be determined. The front door had in service only a spring lock, the lower lock on it was never used, anyone could leave this house at any time. The first thing to learn is whether one or two men were in this house last night, whom they came to see, how long they were here, when they left. This transfer is evidence enough for me that one man was in this room last night as the maid testified. I begin there."

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The decision with which he announced this indicated that he expected trouble from me and wished first to get it over with; it seemed to me also time to discountenance the absurd pursuit of Beatrice he plainly intended to undertake.

"I don't mind your suspecting me and all others," I protested, "but when it comes to your suspecting Miss Beatrice of having had anything whatever to do with this awful affair, I can't allow it. I'd be the lowest kind of cur to stand here and permit it. I'd never forgive myself. I'd——"

"That's right, man, out with it," he interrupted. "I like you all the better for declaring yourself hotly, but——"

It wasn't his praise; it was something in the quick, assured look he flashed that silenced me in the very heat of my indignation. "But?" I reminded him.

"But you haven't the remotest fear that I shall connect her in any way with this, have you?" he demanded.

"How silly!" I laughed.

"Then leave it to me to dig up the facts that will take away the suspicious air of mystery about her attitude, and make everyone believe as you do,"

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he said quickly and left the room before I could think of an answer worth the saying.

I felt the wisdom of this—in time. The sooner we learned the reason for Beatrice's reluctance to say anything about the quarrel with her aunt, the sooner everything would be explained. She would appear cleared of every suspicion, the splendid, unselfish, deeply affectionate girl I knew her to be. I felt a strong impulse to run upstairs to her, to beg her to confide in me what she held back from the others in order that the investigation in this direction might be the sooner over, but, after long parleying with myself, I gave up that idea. She had been through too much to-day. I could do that later after she had had a night's rest, if Trask failed to unravel the mystery meantime.

Nevertheless, left to myself, I gravitated naturally toward her, going up to her room and knocking on the door despite my fear that my visit might be an intrusion. I entered at her bidding to find her sitting up on the couch, and it needed but a glance at her misty eyes and tumbled hair to realize that she had been lying down crying.

My heart went out to her. Oh, how I wished I

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had known her long enough to offer her that sympathy and comfort which an older friend might have given! In grief such as this a man realizes poignantly the best uses for a pair of arms and a shoulder, yet is restrained from doing what nature prompts him to do by a cowardly fear of how it may be taken. I could only stand there staring at her stupidly, muttering lame words of sorrow, and winding up by inquiring if she would not prefer to be left alone.

She made a quick pass to her face with her handkerchief and insisted that I should stay. "No, it will do me so much good to talk it over. I'm not the kind of girl, I think, that finds consolation in having a good cry."

More stupid words from me.

"It seems incredible," she went on, "but I came in here thinking only of poor auntie—and what she had been through—and—and I'm ashamed of myself, but in a few minutes I was crying and pitying myself and thinking only of myself. Isn't it barbarous that I could be so selfish at such a time as this?"

I cannot recall what I said. I remember only how lovely she looked, all drooping and meek, with

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that soft flush of color on her cheeks, and her dear brown eyes gleaming indignantly through a mist.

She rose and walked away toward the front of the room and my eyes went with her. No one I have ever seen walks quite as Beatrice does. It is the difference between a schoolgirl's titter and the smile—graceful, gently coming and going—on the face of a woman whose heart is touched. My admiration broke through my sympathy for her. I felt ashamed. I felt as she felt.

"You know——" her voice trembled with the burden on it and she looked not at me, but away, "you know auntie thought that no one understood her, that—that no one really loved her, but I did——" she was silent for a long time——"I did, and—and I miss her so—now that it's too late to let her know how much."

"She knows now," I murmured inanely.

"Perhaps. But do you want to know how much I missed her?" She turned slowly toward me. "I think this is the first time I have cried since I was a little child. And as I lay there realizing that I couldn't have her, I began to cry for my mother. My mother died when I was very young, I don't remember her at all, so losing auntie seemed just

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like losing mother. She was so good to me. She was so good to everyone."

I was silent. That was hardly my opinion of her aunt, or anyone else's opinion. Miss Alster's goodness and affection had seemed to me too inconstant, too querulous, too exacting to merit the name. It had come and gone, come and gone, and hateful words and actions had followed so closely behind that one could better have depended upon her hate than love. She was a veritable canker of regrets. I thought of the times she had changed her will, each time to punish Beatrice or Linda for some fancied lessening of their manner or feelings, not really in them but in herself. She had been so childish about it, had spoken so slurringly of those she expected to love her! It was well for Beatrice, it was well for Linda, too, that she had died before she had cut off with a shilling those whom she had brought up to expect so much.

I loved Beatrice, but I so little agreed with her on this point that I almost welcomed the knock on the door. It was Trask. He passed me without a word and crossed the room to Beatrice. I heard him whisper that the undertaker had come and was about to take away the body.

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She made only a little gasp, but she ran from the room ahead of him. From the hall above I heard her sobbing, and pulled in my head as I heard the tramp of the men when they bore the body out of the house. Then I bent over the banister again. Beatrice was standing at the top of the stairs looking down toward the door through which her aunt's body had just disappeared. She was not making a sound, but Trask's arm was about her and he was trying to lead her upstairs. I shut myself up in my room.

Trask and I dined alone in the big, somber dining-room that night and had nothing to say. Agnes, at his suggestion, had informed Beatrice that we did not look for her to appear and had taken up her dinner. As we rose, we both looked interestedly at the tray which Agnes had brought down. The food was untouched.

Agnes brought word to us that Beatrice had letters to write and begged to be excused for the remainder of the evening, but that she desired us to make ourselves thoroughly at home. As I came out of the dining-room I remained idly in the reception room a moment, wondering what I should do to pass away the time. When I looked about

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Trask was nowhere in sight. I did not wish to be alone or to sit down to read. I paced up and down the front hall for a time before concluding that I might as well go out and learn what the newspapers had to say about the tragedy. I secured the latest editions at a neighboring news stand and read them in the nearest restaurant. The news of Miss Alster's death was on the first page of each one, but all of them treated the story as if it were a case of suicide which the family were desirous of covering up. The girls were merely mentioned; the disappearance of Keith was not even noted; Trask had done his work and done it well. I left the newspapers in the restaurant and returned to the house with a lighter heart.

As I went up the steps it dawned on me that I was without a latchkey, that it was ten o'clock, and my ringing the bell might disturb Beatrice. I hesitated and struggled with a cowardly impulse to use this as an excuse for not spending the night in this house where I knew I should sleep little if at all, but I ended by touching the bell.

Trask let me in and must have noted my surprise to find him still there, for he did not give me time to voice it.

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"Ah! Raining, I see," he exclaimed, glancing at my wet hat and coat.

"Yes, it's just beginning to come down," I stated, and before I could say more he was on his way upstairs.

I hung my hat and coat on the hall stand and was about to follow him when the telephone at the rear of the hall rang. After a moment's indecision, I decided it was my duty to answer it. The call was for Miss Linda and was in a man's voice, but this made no impression on me. I informed him that Linda was not there, that General Alster had taken her home with him. There was a short pause and he started a sentence that led me to think he was about to ask for someone else in her place, but he stopped, thanked me and said good-by.

"Do you wish to leave your name?" I asked.

"No, thank you, I'll call her up to-morrow," came the reply, and he cut off.

As I went upstairs I noticed that the door of Miss Alster's room was slightly ajar. Well, if Trask was in there pursuing his investigations he was safe from any intrusion on my part, much as I yearned for some sort of human companionship. I hurried on up the next flight and was surprised

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to come upon Beatrice at the top standing fully dressed to go out and looking at me expectantly.

"That telephone call was not for me, was it?" she asked with agitation.

"No. You aren't going out?" I remonstrated.

"Yes, I have some letters to mail," she said moving on as if to avoid argument.

"But it's raining, raining hard by this time," I expostulated.

"I'll get an umbrella downstairs," she promised, beginning to go down the stairs.

"Let me go out and mail them for you, won't you?" I asked bending over the rail toward her.

"No—thank you."

"Then at least I'll go along with you," I protested.

"No—thank you," she said, a little coolly I thought, and before I could say more she had turned into the hall below.

A trifle hurt at her curt refusal, I stood looking down after her, the impulse on me to accompany her despite her words, but the outer door had closed behind her before I could make up my mind whether she might not think me too officious.

While I was yet standing there mooning over my

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intention, I became conscious that someone else was going down the lower flight of stairs. I glanced over the rail. It was Trask with his coat on and his hat in his hand. Was he going home after finishing his work for the night, or was he leaving to follow Beatrice? I called his name. He responded with a wave of his hand which I took to mean good-night.

- My room was on the third floor between those belonging to the two girls. I went into it, turned on all the lights and closed the door, but somehow the departure of these two people gave me a dreadful apprehension that I was alone in the house. I was not, but it was as though I were alone. Even the most phlegmatic will confess the strain it is on the nerves to be shut up in a deserted house. I listened, hopeful of detecting some companionable sound from the two maids on the floor above, but my ears brought me nothing. Then I laughed to myself, picked up a magazine and forced myself to sit down to read. But if my life depended on it, I could neither tell you the name of that magazine nor a word from it that would serve as a clew. While my eyes were directed to its pages, my faculties were absent, listening, with all the force of my

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imagination, for some sound in the silent house. It is a strange feature of this common human terror that one listens so concentratedly for sounds that one always hears them, knows they are purely imaginary, yet cannot be convinced, and ends by becoming incapable of distinguishing real sounds from fancied ones. I tried it with my door open, with it closed, then left it open, and sat down to read again. Before I had turned a page—from which I took in not a word—I heard every consecutive sound that would be made by someone putting a key into the lock, turning it, opening and closing the front door, two flights below. I waited for the sound of steps on the stairs. None came, yet convinced that this time I had not been deceived, I went out in the hall and peered over the banister. Not a soul was visible downstairs. I returned to my magazine with a thoroughgoing disgust at myself. Before I could turn a page, the sounds were repeated. This time I refused to be beguiled. A new sound, a slight click as of metal on metal, came to me and I sat up. I heard a voice lowered for secrecy, and I jumped to my feet.

Downstairs in the front hall someone was at the telephone. It was a woman.

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"Morningside 6873," I heard her repeat a little impatiently and recognized the voice as Beatrice's. Then suddenly I heard her jiggle the telephone hook furiously. "No, never mind, I don't want that number now, do you understand me?" I heard her state excitedly and she hastily hung up the receiver and came upstairs.

She passed my open door without a word. I closed it, feeling better because someone was in the next room to me, but I slept very poorly that night. I kept hearing sounds.

VIII

MY first action the next morning was to hurry downtown to seek offices in the Pinnacle Building suitable to my new trust and position. I preferred offices in the same uprearing skyscraper with Avery, Avery & Avery because then people coming to renew leases, to pay rents, and so forth, would, upon being informed that in future I transacted all that business for the estate, find me within easy reach. Also the Pinnacle Building was well conducted and well located on Broadway near one of the subway stations.

The agent told me that there was not a vacant suite of offices in the entire building. I had feared as much. My disappointment made me lament my ill luck. I explained with vexation my peculiar need for having offices there, without, however, appearing to stir the agent from his heedless indifference; in fact, I was already at the door when he suddenly called.

“Wait just a minute, Mr. Swan.” He turned to

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the stenographer at his right. "We haven't a chance at a thing here, have we?" he demanded.

Again I had evidence that the modern woman stenographer is the modern business man's memory, brain and right hand. "Mr. Longstreet may not have sublet his suite yet," she suggested.

"Sure!" The agent rose with as much emphasis as if the idea had been his own. "Now this man, Longstreet," he informed me as we went up in the elevator, "is a poor nut. Inventor or something of that sort. Nicest sort of a chap, but crazy in the head, thinks he's right up next to some big invention that'll make the world stop and begin to turn round the other way. Poor nut! His father invented money, wanted to land him in the padded comfort of a Wall Street broker's job, but son, he thought he could sure invent something better'n even money." He stopped while we emerged from the express elevator on one of the top stories in the tower which gave this skyscraper its name. "Well, well, he doesn't seem to have put in an appearance yet," he announced after trying the door directly opposite, "but come in, I can show you what it looks like anyway," and he opened the door with a key of his own.

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I went in and saw before me one of those bird's-eye views of Manhattan to the north and east and west that have prepared us for airships. Far away in all three directions stretched the busy pigmy metropolis, people, automobiles and street cars moving soundlessly like atoms below, the rivers with their ferries and shipping stretching like moon-wakes along its length, and the country as a final lure greeting the end of each look. The agent had to call me back to earth.

"Unless I'm mistaken," he broke out, "he wanted to sublet the safe, telephone, desks and furnishings as well."

They—everything—were the height of my wishes. "This is exactly what I want—where can I find him?" I demanded ecstatically.

"Well, like all other inventors, he's the most uncertain of men, but he's usually here early mornings. I don't know what you can do about it except to leave word with me and wait until—hold on, that may be him now!"

The door opened and in stepped a tall blonde youth. I must describe Allan Longstreet because he cuts an important figure in this story. He was tall, so tall that his head and shoulders stooped a

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little from bowing to low doorways and chandeliers; though he could not have been more than twenty-five, this slight stoop, added to a face so serious that it appeared sad, lent him an appearance of age that his young fine figure could not successfully contradict except when his gray eyes lost their far-away look. Then he changed utterly, his face beamed with a whimsical liveliness or with an impulsive enthusiasm which gave him back his youth. I remember that my first impression of him was that he was a hard-faced man who must have been grown on a trellis.

But this expression vanished when the agent finished explaining how we happened to be caught trespassing. Allan Longstreet turned on me a face from which the settled frown lifted.

"I'm sorry—I'm very, very sorry, Mr. Swan," he broke out cordially. "Two days ago I thought of going to Africa or South America or Alaska and wanted to let my offices, but something has happened since——"

By his manner I saw it was something fortunate—for him.

"In fact, I haven't any reason to go now," he went on quickly.

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I murmured my disappointment.

"You should have them if anyone could," he exclaimed warmly.

I joined the agent waiting for me at the door and bade him good-bye. Longstreet seemed not to have heard my leavetaking, his face had hardened again and he appeared to have gone back to his thoughts. With one last regretful glance at so much of the view as was to be had from the door I passed out.

But even before the agent had signaled for the elevator, Longstreet burst through the door and dragged me back into the room.

"I've thought of one way—I suppose you won't consider it for a minute, but you won't offend me by saying so frankly. It really isn't at all necessary for me to hog these offices, I hardly do more than receive my mail here. But at the same time I can't quite bring myself to give them up, on account of the view. Suppose I let them to you just as they are and then you allow me one of the desks for my own use? Would that do?"

"I'm afraid not," I exclaimed reluctantly; "you see, it would be necessary to have the telephone in my name and my name on the door and——"

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"If that's all!" He waved these obstructions aside. "If you don't object to having me around for some few hours of the day, too?"

"You mean?" I stared at him incredulous of his generosity and modesty.

"I mean that I am seldom here for more than a few minutes each day. I'm in my laboratory during business hours. Sometimes I run in here for a time nights, but you wouldn't be here then, would you?"

"You mean?"

"I mean you can have them if you don't mind having me about once in a while, and even then, if you'll only let me know, I'll agree to get out."

By this time I remember that my surprise changed to a faint suspicion of his motives for making so complete a surrender of all his rights to me; but his terms were so low that I couldn't think of any reason for declining so amazing a chance.

"There! I've finished here for the day already," he said after the merest glance at the few letters he had brought up with him. "You see how little I shall be around to annoy you." He laughed and made his way to the door.

"And you won't mind my having a stenographer

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here?" I demanded, doubtful still of my unlooked for good fortune.

"Not if she doesn't chew gum, or want curtains put up between us and the view, or object to my absentmindedness and me," he responded with a laugh, and was off.

There was something so lifting about his generosity that I allowed myself rather to be carried away by it. I ordered the telephone put in my name; I called up the agent and requested him to have my name put upon the door; and then, with a smile, noticed that this door bore no name at all yet. Then I made sure I had the key to the office he had left for me, and went down to Avery, Avery & Avery to arrange for the transfer of such of Miss Alster's affairs as she had permitted them to handle.

My return with authority into this mill; where I had formerly slaved without credit, was one of short triumph. Miss Walsh received me with a few quick congratulatory words; the other clerks smiled and followed me with their eyes as one who has come home with honors; but the senior Avery sent out word for me to wait in the outer office and eventually sent Lim, Junior, to deal with me.

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"Yes, yes, we'll accept your notice and transfer all her papers and business to you as soon as it is proper," he agreed brusquely, "but—but where are you to be? You surely don't expect to carry on this business in your hall room."

His resentment showed through in this fling, but it pleased me. I laughed and told him of the offices I had secured.

"With Longstreet!" His eyebrows went up and he regarded me with amazement. "With Longstreet?" he demanded.

"Yes, what do you know against him?" I demanded, feeling uncomfortable at his look.

He continued to look at me sharply as if he believed that my innocence was assumed. "Oh, nothing that you don't know, I guess," he replied with sarcasm, dropping me to disappear into his private office.

His rude leavetaking brought back my old feeling of outrage against my late employers, but henceforth, thank God, they would have but few chances to put me in my place. I gathered up my few possessions from my desk and went to Miss Walsh. Quickly I informed her of my new work and offices, and told her that I should need a capable stenog-

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rapher to take my letters and also to act as my office assistant.

"I thought that perhaps you might know of some experienced girl whom you could recommend for the position," I stated.

She lifted her head and nodded slowly as if considering the matter, still without looking directly at me. As my face was yet hot with indignation at my contemptuous treatment, I was relieved. Gradually it dawned on me that her eyes were on the doors of the private offices inhabited by the two Averys.

"Suppose I come up to see you in a few minutes," she suggested.

"Do. Thank you." I said good-bye hastily to the other clerks and hurried back to my office. I had barely time to telephone Trask where I was and that I wanted to have a long consultation with him, before the door opened and Miss Walsh stepped in.

"I think I know just the girl for you," she said at once.

"Thank heavens! I have so much to look after all at once that this news is a godsend," I exclaimed. "Who is she? Where can I find her at once?"

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"Well, if you were to reach out your hand, you would hardly need a lamplighter." Her eyes twinkled.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I would like the place myself."

"You!" I looked at her with amazement. "But I can't afford to engage as efficient a girl as you are."

"You can't afford to hire a less efficient one," she retorted.

"But I didn't intend to pay more than fifteen dollars a week—not at the start," I remonstrated.

"That's enough."

"But the Averys will never let you go."

She laughed. "I shall have something to say about that myself."

"But not for a long time and I need an assistant at once, to-day."

Her face grew sober and her eyes fell on me sharply. "Don't you want me for the position?" she demanded, with obvious disappointment.

"Why, yes, but——" I stopped confused.

"Then I want the place and I feel sure I can come at once. Listen! This is what will happen. I will go right down and tell Lim, Junior, that I

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must give him notice, that I have taken another place. The minute he learns I am going to work for you, he will be so angry that he will say I can pack up and go at once. They always can be depended upon to bite off their own noses."

And events turned out quite as she predicted. Within half an hour she was back in my office; and, for fifteen dollars a week, I employed one of the most capable stenographers any New York lawyer ever had, one sufficiently informed regarding the business of Miss Alster's estate to attend to the details and leave me free to look after other affairs temporarily more important.

We had barely got settled when Trask appeared. He nodded and seated himself in the chair beside me, after a cursory glance at Miss Walsh and about the office.

"I sent for you because I felt it was time we came to an understanding," I began.

He made no reply; he continued to gaze dully at the door, his profile toward me.

"Don't you think it is?" I demanded.

"Per-haps."

His reserve warned me that probably he did not care to talk before Miss Walsh. I turned to ask

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her to excuse us, but she was already disappearing into the other office.

Trask waited until she had closed the door between. "Bright girl that," he commented. "Now I'm ready to listen to your interference," he said crisply.

I looked at him. "I'm sorry you look on it that way, but as head of this estate I feel it my duty to keep in touch with your investigation, and to learn each day what steps you have taken to solve the mystery of Miss Alster's death," I declared stoutly.

"On any such understanding as that, I refuse to work on the case," he replied coldly.

I felt the decision in his tone. "But I want to know everything so that I can help you. I want to learn everything so——"

"So that you can protect Miss Beatrice?" he interrupted quickly. "Is that it?"

He was looking at me. I blushed.

"Is that it? Say it!" he commanded.

I nodded.

"Very well. That's different," he stated. "If you were going to attempt to mix into this case because you thought you could help me, or if you

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intended to direct what I was and was not to do, our connection would end right here. You understand that?" He regarded me sternly for a moment, then smiled. "But so long as you are doing it merely for the girl's sake, why, I'll stand for it—yes, I'll break my rule and stand for it, but on one condition."

"What is that?" I asked more meekly.

"That you'll believe me when I tell you that I consider Miss Beatrice innocent."

I nodded.

"And that you'll do your best to control yourself when you find how busy I am running out her reasons for keeping silent about important matters. Can I rely upon you for that?" He regarded me severely.

"I'll do my utmost. I think you must believe she is innocent, no matter how strange her actions appear," I agreed hastily, seeing that no other course was open to me.

"Very well, I'll try you," Trask stated, "and remember this, on the way you act about the news I am now going to tell you depends whether I continue on this case or drop it."

There was something ominous about his silence

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that thoroughly subdued me. I prepared for the unexpected.

"I am on the trail of the man who was in the library with Miss Beatrice on the night of the murder," he began.

"If there was any man there——" I interrupted hotly, and then bit my tongue.

"We are way beyond that," he went on imperturbably after a look at me. "The transfer I found removed any doubt of that. And certain other happenings at the house last night led straight toward the man. About ten o'clock last night Miss Beatrice left the house to mail a letter. The letter was unquestionably to him."

"You followed her? You learned the address?" I demanded.

"I followed her, but the United States mails allow us no liberties in a case like this," he replied, "so as soon as I made sure that this was her only reason for leaving the house I hurried back into it ahead of her."

"Oh!" Some of the sounds I had heard in the house the previous night were beginning to be accounted for. "Then you heard her telephone?"

"Yes." He smiled and his eyes watched mine.

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"The moment after she raised the receiver from the hall telephone downstairs, I lifted the one on the switch to the same instrument that runs into the late Miss Alster's room."

I felt my ire rising against him for the means he had taken to satisfy his curiosity. I restrained it only with difficulty.

"I heard not only all that happened at the 'phone then," he went on studying me narrowly, "but also all that happened when you answered the 'phone for Miss Linda," he went on as if determined to show his worst.

"But you aren't saying a word about this man, and he may have been the person heard talking in Miss Linda's room," I broke in petulantly.

"No, I've never yet found that a mystery was solved by traveling along a number of trails at once or by running around in circles," Trask replied caustically. "And perhaps by following the trail to one man we shall come upon the other man."

"But Miss Beatrice didn't ask for anything except a number. You mean you found to whom Morningside 6873 belongs?"

"Yes." Trask waited, he forced me to ask it.

"To whom?"

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"As a lawyer who reads the newspapers you doubtless have read a lot about the Old Hyena of Wall Street."

"You mean that this number——" I began and stopped short.

"I mean that Morningside 6873 is the secret telephone number of the house of Jim Longstreet, known as the Old Hyena, the Lone Wolf of Wall Street, and a number of other equally reprehensible titles; and I'm as sure as I am that I am breathing now that the man in the library with Miss Beatrice on the night of the murder was someone who lives in his house." Trask's voice changed and became almost fatherly. "There, there, my boy, I didn't really mean to hit you as hard as that, only—why, what's the matter?"

"Nothing," I managed to reply, "nothing, only this is Longstreet's only son's office and he all but forced it on me this morning."

IX

TRASK merely sat there silently listening, while I continued to argue vehemently that Beatrice was above suspicion. Not by a look or movement did he afford me reason to believe that my long and passionate exhortation prevailed upon him in the least. But now he rose quietly, yet with an alertness that told me he had made up his mind.

"All you say," he announced, "does credit to your heart but not to your head. You are reasoning from feelings and I from facts. And now it is my unpleasant duty to put you up against certain facts that are not lightly to be shoved aside if this mystery is to be solved. In the first place, you must put out of your mind for once and all any notion that this is a case of suicide."

"Why then the Maxim silencer?" I persisted.

"A mere whim on the part of an old maid always indulging queer fancies." Trask disposed of this question with a gesture. "In a case as involved as this, the only hope of ever getting anywhere is

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through the elimination of all questions that lead nowhere. The idea of suicide is absolutely untenable. No more of that. We have six other questions, the answers to which would lead somewhere, and we must concentrate our attention on these. Now, if you can answer these questions satisfactorily to me, you will save me a lot of time. Here they are. Who was the man heard talking in Miss Linda's room on the night of the murder? Which one of the four women who were in the room yesterday morning put back the key in the door? When and why did Keith, the butler, vanish from the house?"

"If you were only working to secure answers to those questions I wouldn't mind," I interrupted doggedly.

"I am."

I looked at him questioningly, but he declined to indulge my curiosity.

"But the three things we must learn first," he went on, "also the three things we are likeliest to learn first, are: What was Miss Beatrice's quarrel about with her aunt?"

"Probably over nothing of consequence."

"Probably; but—what is this power Miss Linda

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holds over Miss Beatrice, through which she forces her to hand over to her half of her inheritance?"

I stood looking at him blankly. I had not been able to think of any explanation of this myself.

"And why was Mr. Longstreet in the library with her that night, and Miss Beatrice so determined since not to have it known?"

"Let me ask him if he was there the next time he comes in here," I cried.

"No." Trask was unwontedly emphatic.

"Ah, you suspect him!" I exclaimed.

"I suspect everyone."

"That's because you don't know him," I retorted, glad to debate a matter with him where the ground under me felt sure. "Allan Longstreet is one of the finest young fellows I have ever met—good-hearted, high-principled, generous. If he was with Miss Beatrice on the night of the murder, he must have called casually and left early; he could have had no criminal motive for being there, nothing that warrants you to suspect him."

Trask looked at me sharply for a moment, but said nothing.

"If you won't let me clear up this matter by asking him about it, let me ask her," I urged.

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"Do you think you had better?"

"Yes—why not?"

It was the first time I had ever seen Trask confused. He left me abruptly and took a turn up the office. "Very well, ask her—if you think best," he agreed at last and departed hurriedly, as if leaving me to a fate I had persisted in bringing down on myself.

Somewhat dismayed, I called back Miss Walsh and dictated an advertisement seeking information regarding Keith. Although I specified our desire to have copies dispatched to the newspapers at once, she did not return to her desk immediately, but lingered inexplicably at mine.

"One of the heirs has everything on the other as to looks, hasn't she?" she asked me suddenly out of a clear sky.

"Yes, Miss Beatrice," I asserted warmly; "have you ever seen her?"

"No." Her eyes slipped away from mine and she started toward her desk as if she had learned all she wished.

"Then how did you know that?" I was interested. Most people considered Linda the prettier.

"I didn't," she answered without stopping; "I

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just guessed," and then she added as if feeling some further explanation necessary, "You know women have intuitions about such things."

An intuition as to which of two unseen girls was the more attractive! It was preposterous. However, I wasted no thought upon it, but left the office. I reached the street before I realized I had left my key to the Alster residence in my desk and had to return for it. Propped up against my inkstand was a card on which was typewritten:

FOOLISH ANSWER NO. I

A western cyclone has been known to drive a common straw straight through the trunk of a tree.

Miss Walsh must have prepared and placed it there, but for the life of me I couldn't see any significance it possessed for me, so I just smiled at her inanely and hurried away to Beatrice.

As I entered the house I came upon Linda in her furs making a last approving inspection of herself in the hall mirror. She nodded to me lightly and moved on toward the door.

"Are you going back to General Alster's?" I asked her.

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"Going back there? Well, I should say not!" She disposed of the idea with a quick and scornful petulance. "I went because I thought I would have more freedom there; and they wouldn't even let me go out—said I ought to remain in hiding for a few days at least on account of auntie's death. They were quite as bad as auntie about it, so I'm back here for good or until—when are you going to read us the will, Mr. Swan?"

"Why, the funeral isn't until to-morrow," I expostulated.

"And you won't read it until after that?" She seemed aggrieved.

"No—that is—well, to tell the truth, I hadn't thought anything about it," I stammered.

"No, of course not. But as one of the interested parties I hope you won't keep us in suspense any longer than is necessary. Why can't you read it to us to-morrow when we get back from the funeral?"

"I suppose I could if——"

"Oh, I'll see that Beatrice doesn't object," she said with a smile.

I did not like that smile, and she still lavished it on me as she backed away toward the door. I

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had already placed a foot upon the bottom stair when she called after me, "I suppose at best it will be a long time before we shall come into possession of what has been promised us."

I nodded. I foresaw her anger when she learned the provisions of the will, and did not relish having any argument with her there and then. So I merely nodded.

She hesitated a moment and then came hurrying toward me. "General Alster told me that you have full powers, so I do want to keep on the best side of you," she said eagerly. "Will you let me?"

"Why—of course." I stared at her in amazement.

"I'll be much nicer to Bee if you'll only listen to me a little," she went on with a laugh.

"Why—what do you mean?" I demanded.

"You know." She bobbed her head at me. "Everyone can see that you think the sun just rises and sets in her, and that you'll be governed by her wishes entirely."

"I'm sure I shall try to be fair to her as well as to you," I exclaimed, my anger rising.

"Well, we'll see. Now, don't get angry!" She

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smiled and raised a finger in coquettish defiance. "You really will listen to me?"

I nodded, eager to escape.

"Well then, there's one thing I want to suggest to you now. Auntie wouldn't have an automobile because she knew how useful it would be to us girls. Can't we have a car now? Won't you order one at once? It's dreadful having to go shopping and calling in the cars or in those dirty, common taxis. Will you?"

"I—— I——" I hardly knew what to say to her.

"Ah, you don't know what to say about it until you have talked it over with Bee," she accused me, with a laugh.

"I suppose I ought to learn her wishes on the matter."

"Well," Linda stood silently looking at me for a few instants, "well, don't speak to her about it now. I haven't told her I wanted one yet."

Something in her tone irritated me still more. "You seem to be very confident that she will want whatever you want her to," I blurted out.

"I—well, you wait and see!" With an assured little laugh Linda left me and disappeared through

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the door after a parting smile and wave of her hand.

I found Beatrice in the library upstairs and realized that our conversation must have carried to her through the open door, but Linda's request appeared so trivial beside the matter in hand, that it passed quickly out of mind. Beatrice rose and met me calmly, appearing much more composed than on the previous day, but her fine dark head drooped a little lower than usual as under unwonted burdens and her manner was strangely preoccupied.

"It is very kind of you and Mr. Trask to stay on with us," she said as soon as we were seated and I was wondering how to preface the questions I had undertaken to ask her.

"Trask? Is he staying here, too?" I asked with surprise.

"Yes, and I like him very much," she said quickly, defending him against my tone.

"Yes, he's a very decent sort—for a detective," I added, to learn if she were aware of his occupation.

She must have noticed, but she gave no sign of it. "You'll do as Linda wants about reading the

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will?" she asked instead after a short, irksome silence.

"You'll be equal to hearing it read so soon?" I demanded.

"Oh yes." She disposed of the matter quickly as if unwilling to argue it.

"I hired Mr. Trask at General Alster's suggestion," I went on, leading toward the questions I must ask her. "He thought——"

"Yes, I realize that someone must conduct the investigation, and it will be so much better to have it in the hands of Mr. Trask than in those of the police," she interrupted, as if to save me the unpleasant duty of referring to the strange circumstances of her aunt's death. "I heard Linda ask you if we could have a car; can we?"

"Why, I suppose so, as soon as things are straightened out a little," I stammered, even more astonished at her request than at Linda's. What power had this girl gained over her? I dared not ask my question, nor show my confusion and dismay. "What kind of car do you want?" I asked to cover my feelings.

"I don't know. Whatever kind or make Linda prefers. I wish you would talk it over with her,"

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she said indifferently; and then her voice warmed suddenly as if to prevent her apathy from being misinterpreted. "Poor little Linda, she has felt so mortified at not having a car, as nearly everyone we know has. Just telling her she can have it will make her so much more contented, and—and we do need one," she wound up lamely.

I forgot all about my errand in her pathetic subjection to Linda's whims. I felt a sense of personal outrage that this girl who was suffering so keenly over her aunt's death should have been forced to listen to them.

"You have had a long talk with her since she got back?" I inquired.

"N-o, only a few minutes this morning," she replied.

"You realize that she was just as discontented at General Alster's as she has always been here?"

"Yes—poor child!"

"Well," I hesitated, but I had to say it, "I hope you aren't going to attempt the impossible. I hope you aren't going to devote yourself to trying to make her happy. I hope you aren't going to allow her to order you about as if——" I stopped because she had risen and I feared I had gone too

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far. "I wouldn't have said this," I went on, "only this calamity seems to have made no more impression on Linda than on a kitten, and it seems unfair that she should let you bear the brunt of it and then——"

It was her look that held me this time and I saw I had gone too far, but there was no stopping me now. "I don't think you realize how it looks," I burst out. "She merely announces what she wants and you fly to get it for her regardless of your own desires. In the case of an automobile I happen to know that you——"

"You're mistaken. I want one—now."

"Yes but——"

"You'll oblige me, Mr. Swan, if you'll say nothing more about it, if you'll simply get it."

"It looks as if she had you in her power, as if for some reason you were not in a position to deny her anything she asked of you."

"I can't help how it looks. I don't care how it looks. I am merely asking you to do what you can to—to keep peace in the family."

The break in her voice stilled my rage at once. I stood in rueful silence looking at her plaintive face and every other feeling was lost in compas-

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sion. "I hope you realize that I wouldn't have talked this way to you if I didn't care," I apologized.

"Yes, of course," she smiled wanly.

"Then tell me what it is," I pleaded. "Tell me what it is Linda knows that you dread to have her tell. I won't tell a soul if you don't want me to after we have talked it over. I am not asking this just out of idle curiosity. I want to help you, I want to get you out of a position that is directing perfectly absurd suspicion at you. Let me help you, won't you?"

"You can't."

I was dismayed at the coldness and firmness of her response. "Has it anything to do with the man or men who were in this house the night before last?"

"Why do you ask me that?"

"Because people are thinking that."

"What people are thinking that?"

"Why, Trask and I and—can't you see that your silence allows us to place no other construction upon it? It has already convinced them that there was a man here, as Agnes testified. It has all but convinced them that this man——"

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“Stop!”

There was a severity in her tone and a look in her eyes that checked me instantly, warning me that I had provoked her beyond endurance, that told me plainly that, however unselfish my intentions, I could pursue this inquiry further only at the risk of losing her friendship. And then, as I stared at her, the white look on her face and the fiery glare in her eyes warned me of something more, filled me with a great fear. I was as nothing to her compared with her secret. I was as nothing to her compared with—was it Linda or this man whom she was shielding? My mouth went suddenly dry. I longed to ask her if it was another man beside whom I appeared as nothing to her. I dared not. The conviction that it was came upon me from behind, put its arms around me and pulled me to the ground, gagged me, bound me, made it impossible for me to do anything except stand there staring speechlessly, helplessly at her, the fear making me meeker with every second.

And then suddenly she seemed to guess or perceive my abject condition. Her eyes softened, her tone became casual and she led the talk away to other matters. For a long time I heard only the

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soothing sound of her voice; her words found no entrance into my mind, the mishap that had befallen all my hopes and plans left room for thought of nothing else. And yet I must give her credit. She overlooked my plight; she talked on and on without looking at me or requiring any response. Slowly it dawned on me that she was calling me by my first name, that I must make an effort to cover up my share of the embarrassing situation. I began to listen and to murmur responses.

"You'll arrange to transfer to Linda half of whatever may be coming to me under the will?"

"Yes." Linda and her attitude toward Linda mattered nothing to me now.

"And until you can do that you'll see that she receives half of whatever income may be due me?"

I nodded.

"And——" she hesitated and seemed to ask this against her wishes, "and you'll let me have a thousand dollars—for something personal as soon as you conveniently can?"

I agreed. I would have agreed to anything by this time in order to get away by myself.

Finally I expressed an intention of seeing her again later and escaped awkwardly into the hall.

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I had a glimpse of someone issuing from the room further down the hall, but it meant nothing to me. I closed the door tightly, and as I did so a voice whispered over my shoulder:

“When you give her that money be sure to give it to her in the form of a check.”

I turned dully, not sure that those words had really been spoken. It was Trask.

“You damned, dirty, low eavesdropper,” I cried, pushing him aside and making for the stairs.

He did not answer me. He merely smiled.

X

I SPENT several hours alone in my room, and I left it a different man. It is true that Beatrice had never offered me any encouragement and that my suit for her hand was an extraordinary one, but extraordinary hopes bring about extraordinary changes when someone knocks down one's house of cards. She had swept away all my hopes, and I felt bitter toward her, toward everyone, and especially toward the man, whoever he was, whom she unquestionably preferred to me. Let this explain the change in my attitude respecting her with Trask.

As I came downstairs I observed Agnes in the front hall with a small, square, blue box which she had just received at the door. At a glance I knew it for a box of violets from one of New York's best florists.

"For Miss Beatrice? I'll take that up to her. I'm going right upstairs," exclaimed Trask, suddenly appearing from the back of the hall.

As he brushed past me on the stairs, I found

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time to whisper, "I'll do as you said about the money."

"That's more like it," he replied with an approving smile, and went on without waiting.

I hurried to my office, intending to keep busy there so long that I should not have to dine at the house and face Beatrice. Miss Walsh welcomed me with a smile, and came at once to my desk to report on a number of matters that had come up during my absence. She had handled them with discretion, quite as well as if I had been there myself to attend to them. It was on the tip of my tongue to compliment her, but I was in no mood for compliments. I recalled my earlier intention of increasing her salary to what she had been getting with Avery, Avery & Avery, but I put it off. She seemed to have something on her mind.

"Oh, Mr. Longstreet was in," she informed me at last.

"Was he?" I asked, subduing my feeling of personal outrage against him.

"Yes, and he wanted to know if I would have time to take care of his mail, too."

I pretended to be absorbed in the lease I was reading. "Well, what did you tell him?"

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"I told him I couldn't think of agreeing until I learned how you felt about it."

"Well, I'm willing," I snapped, "but you know what the rich are. I'll wager he won't want to pay you anything for it."

"Fifteen dollars was the bribe he offered," she announced without a smile.

"Ah, a month?"

"No, a week."

"You take it. You take all you can get from him," I cried in a greater fury; and then, observing her surprise, came to my senses. "Take it. With the twenty dollars which I intend to pay you from now on you'll be getting five dollars more than you were downstairs," I counseled her coolly.

"I won't take a raise from you yet," she affirmed stoutly.

"Why not?"

I had never seen Miss Walsh's eyes drop before those of any man before. I thought I saw faint signs of a blush as I pressed her vainly for a reason, so I soon gave up, not daring to run any risk of losing her invaluable services. Could she be interested in Longstreet, too? It shows my un-

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reasoning jealousy of him that I dreamed of such a thing.

"Does Miss Beatrice take the death of her aunt very much to heart?" Miss Walsh asked me suddenly from the other end of the office.

"Yes, she's the only one that does. She's the only one in the house that seems to have any heart. She——" I brought my eulogy of her to a stop, suddenly recalling my intended change of attitude toward her.

There was no sound from the other end of the room for several minutes, though I felt Miss Walsh's eyes on me. Then her typewriter began to click furiously.

I pretended to work until her hour arrived for leaving, and when she remained made it plain that I wished the office to myself. She placed some papers on my desk requiring my signature and left without taking offense. But when I came to look over these papers I found among them another card on which she had typewritten:

FOOLISH ANSWER No. 2.

Someone pushed an insufferable optimist off the roof of a twenty-story building. In at each floor as he went down, he yelled, "All right, so far!"

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I placed it back on her desk after the merest smile. Thinking she must have typewritten this to send to someone else, I dropped into my chair with a sigh of relief at being alone at last. Until long after eight o'clock I sat there, still stewing in my new-found bitterness toward Allan Longstreet, and hoping that he might unexpectedly come in so I could question him and make up my mind whether or not he was the man in the library on the night of the murder. I debated my impulse to give up his office. I imagined I was doing it, acted my scornful part in a furious scene that lasted uncounted minutes and left me as worn out as if the clash had occurred. And when, exhausted, I thought better of my intention, the suspicion suddenly burst upon me that while I was waiting here he might be calling upon Beatrice at the house. Instantly I seized my hat and coat and hurried there.

I heard voices in the reception room downstairs. The man's voice sounded familiar; the girl's voice sounded more like Linda's; but convinced that my fears had come true I stole by upstairs. It was with astonishment, almost with disappointment, that I found Beatrice at the head of the stairway to

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my floor, waiting as if she had been on the lookout for my return.

"We missed you at dinner, Robert," she said with a kindness that I would earlier have joyed in.

"I couldn't get away any sooner. I hope nothing happened that would have made my presence useful," I returned, my voice involuntarily tinged with a little sarcasm.

She looked at me. For a moment I thought I had roused her anger again. Then she went on in the same tone as before:

"You're overworking. Come down into the library with me a while and rest. I'm all alone."

"Not to-night, if you don't mind," some surly brute inside me forced a second rebuff to her peace offerings. Who was I to be cajoled thus quickly back into second place in her affections? And yet the little start she made hurt me. "Oh, here is the check you wanted," I announced to relieve my own embarrassment.

She took it with a "Thank you. Good night, then," gentle as all her words before, left me, and went along the hall to her own room. I opened the door of my room and entered. In the most comfortable chair, drawn up to the light, reading,

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sat Trask, as if he also had been lying in wait for me.

"Ah!" he permitted the magazine to drop in his lap, "I have been appointed a committee of one by the two girls to inform you that your absence at dinner was noticed and commented upon and must not be allowed to happen again."

I laughed scornfully. "Bad as that?"

"Well, Miss Beatrice looked her disappointment, if she did make excuses for you, and Miss Linda—well, she went so far as to accuse you of decamping with all the money. I don't think we could have kept her here much longer this evening if she hadn't had a caller. I presume you noticed that much on your way in, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Did you learn who her caller is?"

"No."

"Not interested?"

"Not particularly."

"You should be."

"Why?" I dropped into the chair on the other side of the table.

"Because it's Harold Avery."

"Harold Avery!" I sat up straight and peered

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across the table at him. "What in the world is he doing here?"

"I don't suppose you know that he was one of the moths that formerly fluttered about Miss Linda. Ah, I see it is strange news to you!" Trask paused and just flicked me with a smile. "Well, since you are to be my paymaster, I suppose I might as well convince you that I have not been wasting my time to-day. I've been low down again. I've been quizzing the servants, but the results must at least partially excuse my habit. Did you know, for instance, that the late Miss Alster had a fairly tempestuous objection to either of her nieces having any men around who had the least appearance of being suitors for their affections?"

I lied brazenly in order to learn more.

"Well, she did, and when the girls delayed or declined to get rid of them at her command, she stepped into the midst of their affairs herself and made it so unpleasant for their admirers that they came not again. Harold Avery was one of the victims. According to Agnes, he met Miss Linda; he pursued her with candy and flowers; he called once, twice—and the third time he was received by the redoubtable Miss Alster herself and discharged

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in such a fury of scorn that he dared not come again when she was at home."

"Trask," I bent across the table toward him, "could he have been one of the two men in the house that night?"

"I don't know. Here he is calling again the moment he feels it is safe. But how do you know there were two men here that night? It may have been the same man's voice that Agnes heard both times."

I rose to my feet in my excitement over the possibility. "You don't—you don't think he could also have been the man talking with Miss Beatrice in the library?" I cried.

"Perhaps. I don't want to raise your hopes too high, but it is quite possible."

His lukewarmness was discouraging. I sank back into my chair. "You're a detective. It seems to me you might at least have found out that much by this time," I complained.

"What! From servants who don't know and from two girls who have some strange reason for not telling me?" Trask chuckled as if he thoroughly enjoyed the sensation of being found fault with. "Swan, you've got it bad," he went on imperturb-

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ably after a time, "and not to tease you I'll tell you that I have already approached both girls on the matter. Miss Beatrice said she had told all she could, begged me not to question her further, and was so affected that I hadn't the heart to; and Miss Linda, who fully deserves her title of the young fiend, avoids me; when I do get her in a corner and begin to ask questions she laughs openly and cannot be induced to answer a single one seriously. She smiles on one like a poppy, but really she's as hard as a brick wall. However——"

"However, you'll learn—in time," I asserted with sarcasm.

Trask consulted his watch. "Within fifteen minutes, perhaps."

"How?" My interest was roused anew.

"When direct methods fail indirect methods are sometimes surprisingly successful. I suppose it would astonish you to learn that I already have three of my assistants planted in houses in the neighborhood. Two of the girls are employed in the houses on either side of this one; there is such a demand for smart-looking maids that it is usually very easy to place them where we wish them. I hoped to get my best man, Burke, into the house

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opposite, but they wouldn't have him. However, he made friends with one of the maids; he's over there calling on her now; and, unless he falls down as he never has before, we're likely to have important news from him within a few minutes."

"What can he have to tell you?" I was scornful, but much more interested.

Trask smiled. "You little know all the curious eyes that are on you in a big city. Every house, every door, every window, every passerby on the street! Eyes and ears everywhere!"

Would his confidence in his man be justified? Would he be able to report upon the people leaving and entering this house on the night of the murder? I felt a sneering conviction that he would learn—nothing. "I gave Miss Beatrice a check for that money as you requested," I announced.

"Yes, I heard your voice outside the door. I inferred as much," responded Trask, "and this gives me a chance to explain why I wanted you to give her a check."

"That's superfluous," I protested; "it's fairly obvious that you hoped by the check to learn what she did with the money."

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"More than that, Swan, more than just that," Trask rejoined. "Don't lose sight of the fact that the disappearance of Keith, the butler, is one of the important factors in this case. If Keith vanished in collusion with anyone else in this house, he is sure to make demands on that one for money on which to remain in hiding. That check won't lead us to his hiding place—he'll take care of that—but it may give us some slight clew to it."

"There's your man," I exclaimed, unnecessarily, because Trask was already rising to make his way to the door. He opened it; a small, wiry Irishman with blue eyes and a peculiarly jocular and winning twist to his mouth entered and stood looking at me until Trask closed the door and introduced us.

Burke began to make humorous remarks about the weather to me, apparently paying no attention to his superior, who was pacing up and down the room, his course ending each time by the door. I was bored and replied perfunctorily, wondering if this were all a subterfuge to get rid of me before important news was imparted. But then suddenly it was all explained to me without words. In his last turn toward the door Trask suddenly turned

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the knob, opened the door, and looked quickly outside to learn if there were eavesdroppers.

"All right, Jimmy, now we'll have what you've learned," he said briskly as soon as he had reclosed the door. "Did you round up the two girls?"

"Yes, sir, dropped in on them late this afternoon. Nothing doing yet so far as they're concerned."

"Any better luck yourself?"

"Well, I didn't learn so awful much, but what I did learn looks sorter handy."

"Fire away!"

Burke took the chair Trask had pointed out for him. He seemed quite at ease in our presence, though from his clothes one would have taken him for a good-natured but shiftless man out of a job and not over-anxious to get one. "Well, it didn't look as if I was going to get much of anything out of that skirt across the street," he began; "she turned out to be the second girl and not much as to headworks, but she was that flattered to have a caller for a night in the kitchen that I could see that she wouldn't hold anything back from me. We got all over telling each other all about ourselves in the first fifteen minutes, and after that the talk was hard going. I began to tell her about all

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the murders in the papers, but it didn't suggest anything to her, she only got white and fidgety. I had to bring up the murder here myself, and even then I didn't succeed in shaking anything out of her mind. I realized then I'd got next to the wrong girl and asked her to introduce me to the others; but she was just stupid enough to be jealous and leery of running any such risk as that.

"That gave me my chance to get sore. I pretended to be sulky because she wouldn't give me a knockdown to the others; I shut up tight and left her to think up talk herself. It was some strain on the poor skirt's mind, now take it from me; most of the time I spent in listening to the tick of the kitchen clock, but I hung on and at last she got to the kale. I didn't learn much, chief, so don't get your hopes too high."

"All right, Jimmy, let us have it."

"Well, Mollie, the girl I went to call on, has a back room upstairs so she's never seen anything, but one of the other girls, Cecilia, has one of the front rooms on the top floor right across the street. On the night of the murder Cecilia went upstairs to bed about 9:15. The window of her room was open and she went to close it before lighting the

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gas. As she stood there looking out she saw a man sneak out of the door of this house, close it without a sound and then run like the devil down the street. His actions excited her curiosity, so she leaned out the window and watched him until he turned south. Then she——”

“One minute, Jimmy, any description?”

Burke made a grimace. “All the stiff I talked to could tell me about him was that he was a little man.” His disgust was thick. “A little man!” At Trask’s nod he went on:

“Well, Cecilia thought he might have been running for a doctor, so she stood at the window waiting to see if he brought one back. Ten minutes later she saw another man come out of this house, close the door in the same way and start off—only this one walked slowly and as if he didn’t care a damn who saw him.”

“Any description of him?”

“Very feeble. Tall man in a tall hat and a fur-collared overcoat. I’m sorry, chief, but that’s all I could get.”

Trask paused only to nod his satisfaction before turning to me. “Well, you see there were two men,” he said.

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"Yes, but——" I rose in my excitement, "that first man was probably the butler and the second man—Trask! that man calling downstairs has a high hat and a fur coat. It may have been Avery, not Longstreet, who was here, do you hear?"

Trask looked at me a long time and seemed loath to say it. "You forget the man downstairs is not more than five feet six and the man this girl saw was tall."

"So you still believe it was Longstreet who was here?" I demanded.

"I'll make sure soon." Trask stopped before his assistant. "Jimmy, of course you gagged both of those girls?" he inquired.

"Sure! I told Mollie to tell Cecilia that they both had better keep their mouths tight or they might be jailed as material witnesses."

"Right!" Trask patted him approvingly on the shoulder. "Now to-morrow you go on Longstreet and don't let me see or hear of you again until you learn where he was at the time of the murder."

"Yes, sir. Good night, chief." Burke shook hands with me and disappeared from the room.

The news was too indeterminate to discuss. I sat dumbly in my chair wondering whether Trask might

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not be wrong in his conclusion, and Trask walked silently up and down the room, evidently sorting his new information into place.

Suddenly there came a knock again at the door.

"There's your man! He's come back," I called out to Trask.

"No, that was a woman's tap. You had better answer it," he replied, making no move toward the door.

I got up reluctantly, went to it and threw it open. Trask was right. In the hall outside stood Beatrice.

"I am very sorry to disturb you," she apologized, "but I wonder—would it be too much trouble for you to get me the money for this?" She handed back the check.

"I—I can't possibly get it for you until to-morrow," I demurred, stealing a quick look at Trask.

"That will be soon enough. If you only will it will save me so much trouble," she stated.

Prompted by Trask's nod, I took back the check and promised to do it. She thanked me profusely. After the door was closed I turned to find Trask shaking his head.

XI

I RETURNED to the house the following afternoon just in time to hand Beatrice the money before the funeral services began. They were held in the house. Miss Alster had so few friends, despite her money, that General Alster thought better of having them in a chapel or church. I remained upstairs with General Alster and the girls, listening to the interminable drone of the officiating clergyman, and pitying him for having to sell his soul imparting pious virtues to the deceased to which no one gave credence. Beatrice was the only one affected; she sat with her handkerchief to her face, though no sound of weeping issued from it. I marveled at the change in myself that her treatment had caused in a single day. Such are the reactions of human nature that I found myself doubting if her show of grief were real.

The cadenced drone of the clergyman came finally to an end and I knew that slight stir in the silence downstairs to betoken that the few there were view-

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ing the remains before being ushered out of our way. Ghastly performance! I made up my mind that this was an ordeal which I should escape. And I managed it without difficulty in the confusion of quieting Beatrice and getting her away from the flower-embanked casket.

I was astonished to see how few people went in the carriages to the crematory with us. I have been told that cremation is one of the most beautiful and wonderful of sights, that few can witness that last swift moment when a body suddenly becomes pink as though with life before crumbling into ashes without feeling afresh an awed belief in the immortality of the soul. You will not understand my sensitiveness, but I could not look on it. It was with a deep sense of relief that I tumbled back with General Alster and the two girls into the carriage that was to bear us away.

Upon our return I read the will to General Alster and the girls in the library. It began with that strange preamble to a legal document wherein Miss Alster, despite my protests, had insisted upon foisting on others the natural results of characteristics and faults of her own. I can set down those sentences from memory; they were so bitter, so direct,

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so unfair, and withal so characteristic of the testator's whole life. The will began:

I have never been fortunate enough to have a real friend, or to receive that gratitude or friendship which makes life worth while. It may be my own fault, but I have striven for it, earned it, yet never have I received it. Those whom I have helped have turned against me, one after another. If I were inclined to be just, I should leave all my property to public charities. But it seems to me merely to be a choice between indulging thousands of thankless people and the few who are accustomed to my benefactions, however ungrateful they have shown themselves for them. And so——

Then came the part of the will important to the living. She left nothing to the public charities or to her servants. She left fifty thousand dollars to Linda; she devised all the remainder of her estate, amounting to over a million and a half, to Beatrice, but only the income on both of these bequests was to be paid them for some time yet. The will provided for a trust in which all the estate was to be merged, and of which I was to have charge for a period of two years after her death. It was a strange will, strange from beginning to end. I felt it better to leave the room immediately after read-

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ing it so that the two girls and General Alster might feel free to talk over its provisions.

I was about to go downstairs when I observed Trask coming up. He bore in one hand a small box of violets such as had come the day before. "Ah, another, and for Miss Beatrice?" I inquired bitterly.

He merely nodded and went on.

I started down the stairs, and then I suddenly stopped short. Trask, instead of taking those violets directly to Beatrice in the library, had taken them into his own room at the head of the stairs. For a moment I hesitated, then I went back, opened the door and entered his room without knocking. On the center table lay the blue box, and bending over it untying the string was Trask.

"Ah, now that you've caught me, I suppose I'd better explain," he said lightly. "Come here and let's see what we'll find to-day."

He removed the cover of the box and lifted out the large and fragrant bunch of violets. And then, as if knowing precisely where to look, he separated their bunched stems and deftly pulled out a slip of paper hidden in their depths. I looked over his shoulder and read:

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v arrq gur zbarl ol gbzbbebj ng gur bhgfvqr yrnir
vg ng gur fnzr cynpr jul unirag lbh tbg genfx bhg
bs gur ubhfr lrg ur vf qnatrebhf

I stared at the gibberish in amazement, trying vainly to find a single word in any foreign language that would give me a clew. It was printed legibly and painstakingly on a small scrap of unmarked paper. Trask stood aside and let me examine it in silence.

"What can it be? It isn't in Hebrew, is it?" I begged at last.

He smiled. "No, as a matter of fact, it's a cipher, one of the easiest, but you could hardly be expected to make it out on sight. I got it in less than an hour yesterday, but——"

"Yesterday?" I exclaimed, looking from the strange message to him.

"Yes, there was another message in the bunch of violets that came yesterday and I made a copy of it before putting it back and delivering them. Here, let me show you how easy it is to decipher that message." Trask placed the slip of paper between us on the table. "In the first place it opens with a single letter 'v'; now what letter in our alphabet is used alone? 'I,' of course. That does for a start,

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'v' is used in the place of 'I' and printed as a small letter so as not to prove too easy. Now is any word in that message repeated? Yes, 'gur' occurs one, two, three, four times. What word of three letters is repeated often in this and all other languages? 'The,' isn't it? Then it stands to reason that 'g' stands for 't,' 'u' for 'h' and 'r' for 'e.' Why, a child could figure this cipher out from a start like this. I didn't even stop to figure out which letter was used oftenest—which is 'e'; I jumped smashbang to a solution just from those first two discoveries. Don't you see it?"

I shook my head dumbly.

"Well, that's because you probably have never had anything to do with unraveling cipher messages. Here's the simple little joker that solves the riddle." Trask drew from his pocket a small card on which the letters of the alphabet were arranged as follows:

a b c d e f g h i j k l m
n o p q r s t u v w x y z

"Guess it now?" he demanded.

Again I had to shake my head.

"What! Not now? Can't you see that by using

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the letters below for those above and those above for those below, you would get some such cluster of consonants as this?" He pushed a pencil and piece of paper toward me. "Here, you put down the hidden letters as I call them out to you and see how soon this begins to make sense."

With his finger traveling along the message, and his eyes flying from this to the key which he had drawn up, he began to read it off to me letter by letter. Before he had gone three words I saw that he had solved the cipher. After he had finished he looked over my shoulder at the translation. It read:

I need the money by to-morrow at the outside. Leave it at the same place. Why haven't you got Trask out of the house yet? He is dangerous.

"Very flattering to me, I am sure," exclaimed Trask with a laugh. "And now that we have a copy, we'll put this message back and send the violets along." Without further comment he replaced the cipher among the stems of the violets.

"Trask, what does this mean?" I demanded severely when I could stand the silence on his part no longer.

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"It means——" he stopped while he carefully tied the string about the blue box—"it means, I should say, that someone outside this house who has reason to hide is carrying on a correspondence with someone inside by means of this cipher—and violets."

"Don't treat me like a fool, anyone can see that," I remonstrated. "The sickening thing about this is that these are sent to Beatrice. Don't you see? The man who was in the library with her is blackmailing her for money."

"Yes, that's the way it looks," he admitted carelessly.

"Looks! What do you mean?" I demanded. "It can't mean anything else, can it?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"Suppose the violets were sent to her as a blind. Suppose the message was intended for someone else?"

By the time I had recovered from my surprise at his suggestion and began to ask questions, he had gathered up the box and was starting toward the door. "Come, let's find out about that first before we jump to any conclusions," he ordered.

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"Things happened yesterday that prevented me from learning what became of the message."

He was already out in the hall and there was nothing left for me to do but to follow him. As I joined him he put the box of violets into my hand. "Here, you deliver them to-day," he ordered. "I gave her the box that came yesterday. And let me go in first. We mustn't go in together with them, it might put them on their guard."

He knocked and went into the library. After a few minutes I followed.

Both Linda and Beatrice were still there and General Alster was on his feet as if on the point of taking leave. I placed the box of violets on the table without a word.

"If you are determined to act so generously, I can find nothing further to say against it," General Alster went on, addressing Beatrice.

"Linda was brought up with the expectation that she should at least share equally with me in the estate; it seems only fair that I should make up what she has lost," responded Beatrice.

"Yes—yes—but you are giving her half what you inherit in addition to what she inherits herself."

"It only makes a difference of a few thousands.

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There will be ample left for me," replied Beatrice.

"Well, I presume you girls know what you are doing." General Alster with a sigh moved away toward the door.

"It isn't any use to argue with her," broke in Linda, "she is determined to do it. Auntie always knew that Bee cared nothing about her money. Probably that's why she left most of it to her."

One would have inferred from Linda's tone that she had wearied of protesting against Beatrice's generosity. Knowing what I did, I shot a quick look from her to Trask. But his eye was not to be caught.

General Alster made his departure and Beatrice returned to her seat at the front of the room, passing the table on which lay the box of violets without even a glance.

"Oh, there's a box which just came for you," I said after a few moments of embarrassing silence.

"For me?" Beatrice looked up at me with surprise and, at my nod, rose and crossed to the table. She picked up the scissors that lay there, but paused before cutting the string. "It's strange," she mused, "I received just such another box yesterday and there was no card in it. I wonder—but perhaps

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there'll be one with these." She nervously cut the string and removed the violets; she searched the box; she finally even parted the flowers to see if a card might be lodged among them, but she made no such inspection of the stems where the message lay hidden. "Well, I suppose I'll learn in time who sent them," she said, with a sigh, laying them down on the table and returning to her seat.

"Don't you want me to put them in water for you?" I asked.

"No, thank you, I'll attend to that later," she replied.

I looked at Trask. His eyes were directed across the room; there was a far-away look in them as if he were buried in important thought. I followed his eyes. In that mirror on the other wall no one could be watched except Linda. She had turned away, was looking out the window with her back toward us.

Soon the constrained silence on us all—only Beatrice made any pretense of talking to me and I felt that even she was doing it to get back in my good graces—soon the silence got on my nerves and I rose, apologized, and left for my own room. I was intensely interested to learn what would become of

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the message hidden among the stems of the violets, but I knew that the solution of that question might safely be left to Trask.

He came to my room half an hour later and sank into the comfortable chair across the table from me. Neither by the expression on his face when he entered nor by his action could I make out whether he had solved the question. I studied him carefully without being able to make up my mind. More and more I was realizing that Trask was a man from whom another could learn little or nothing except what he vouchsafed to divulge with his lips. I was about to ask point blank when he broke out suddenly:

"That was an excellent move of yours, Swan, leaving the room."

"Why?"

He smiled a moment. "You'll never believe it."

"Why?" I asked again, growing exasperated. "What makes you say that?"

"Because it's hardly within reason for you to believe that both of the girls dread your presence more than they do that of the detective on the case."

I could not forbear the retort: "You seem to

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glory in the fact that they consider you more of a fool than I."

"Well, that wasn't quite the way I was looking at it, but, nevertheless, I guess you've hit the nail on the head," he replied with a chuckle.

"What happened—after I left?" I demanded, relieved that he had not taken offense.

"Well, we talked a while; then, first inquiring if I were intruding, I picked up a magazine and began to look at its pictures. I didn't care to lose another chance to learn what became of the cipher, and neither of the girls appeared inclined to talk. There was a dead silence for about half an hour, and then Linda sighed and rose, and said she guessed she'd go to her room. On the way to the door she stopped at the table, picked up the violets, buried her face in them, and made some remark about how fragrant and refreshing they were. She had her back toward me and, fool that I was, I had not had the foresight to seat myself where I could keep an eye on the flowers in the mirror, but when she went out, the way she carried one hand hidden from me made me suspicious. Miss Beatrice was absorbed in her thoughts. I rose, and, using the same subterfuge Linda had, contrived while smelling



"On the way to the door she stopped at the table,
picked up the violets."

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of the flowers to search for the slip of paper among the stems. It was gone."

"Gone! You mean Linda took it? Linda!" I exclaimed.

"Unless Miss Beatrice is sleight of hand artist enough to have extracted it when she handled them right before our eyes."

"But—but why should they have come addressed to Miss Beatrice when the note in them was meant for Linda?" I expostulated.

"Swan," Trask rose and looked at me impressively, "unless I'm way at sea there's a more astute criminal connected with this crime than we have yet thought to look for. The cleverness of this very trick proves that; and I accept the premise and confess that I have been shortsighted in remaining here when I ought to be outside looking into the antecedents of that man Keith. You may not see much of me for the next few days. I must learn enough about him to determine whether he had any apparent motive for committing this murder, or, if I can't decide that, to judge from his history about what type of human being he is. He is beginning to loom bigger to me than at first. You don't mind if I take a little time to run him out?"

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My face must have shown my dislike at the sudden turn his investigation was taking, for he went on before I had time to put it in words.

"Of course, I realize that you regard it as my first duty to learn who the man was with Miss Beatrice on the night of the murder. I'm not promising, but it would please you, wouldn't it, if in running down Keith I found that it was he instead of the man we thought?"

I admitted it.

"Well, good-bye, then. I'm going to have a few minutes' chat with Linda and then I'm off to see what I can dig up about Mr. Keith."

I did not see him again that day, nor in fact for several days, and within the hour I particularly regretted it, for in descending to dinner I was waylaid by Linda; and her conversation afforded me something with which I could have crowed over Trask for his statement that the girls were more suspicious of me than of him.

"Mr. Trask's gone and I hope he never comes back," Linda informed me confidentially as she led the way downstairs.

"Why? Don't you like him?" I asked.

"Like him!" She laughed ripplingly, and the

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echo sounded ill to me, roaming through a house of mourning.

"Has he been annoying you?" I persisted.

"No." She said it a little too sharply.

"Then why——" I began.

"Oh, well, when auntie was alive I had her everlastingly tagging at my heels and asking silly questions, and now——" Linda shook her head wilfully as to free it from a new found bridle.

"We all have to submit to some things we don't like."

"I don't like him. He reads my thoughts," snapped Linda, and left me abruptly to enter the dining-room.

XII

SEVERAL days passed during which I did not see Trask nor hear from him.

Two hulking detectives called at my office from police headquarters and asked me innumerable questions about Keith. It developed that they suspected Keith because he had fled and were devoting all their attention to running him down. I described him to the best of my ability, and, after laboriously writing down the details, they departed with profane assurances that their heavy hands would be on him within a few days now.

The business of the estate kept me very busy. I saw little of the two girls, except occasionally at dinner and evenings when I was not called away from the house. Of the two, as time went on, I found myself growing more favorably disposed toward Linda, so soon as I realized that her faults were mostly due to her youth and wilfulness; now that no one attempted to exercise any restraint over her, they were not so noticeable. The two girls appeared to have come to some agreement, each to

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go her own way; and if either had anything heavy on her mind, it appeared to be Beatrice. Her beautiful olive face seemed buried in a dark sadness; she said little and appeared to avoid both Linda and me; she started, grew highly nervous at the least unexpected noise, and seemed ever apprehensive that something was about to happen. Sometimes I caught her large, dark, smoldering eyes dwelling sadly on me and I winced. Pity is but a potion when given in the place of love.

At the office I had not seen Allan Longstreet since that first day when he had turned over his quarters to me. He appeared daily when I was not there, Miss Walsh told me, but it was as if he were on watch, and chose to come when I would not be there to question him. For fervently did I desire by questions to learn whether he were the man that Beatrice so much preferred to me. I could not make up my mind.

I was consequently greatly surprised a few mornings later to see him tear into the office, lodge a small open bag on my desk and, without even saluting either Miss Walsh or me, drag away the telephone from my side and call for a number.

I was too much annoyed by the sudden irruption

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and the havoc his bag had wrought among the papers on my desk to give attention to the telephone number that he called. But his first speech made me miss not a word and at the same time appear very busy.

"I—ah, why that is you, Beatrice, isn't it?" he exclaimed excitedly.

I opened noisily a contract on heavy legal cap and hid my frowning face between its pages. It seemed something more to me than chance that made Beatrice answer his call herself.

"I've got it, Beatrice, just as I thought; I've finished with my experimenting; I've found the one needed element," he burst out with an enthusiasm that increased rather than diminished. "It was—no, I don't dare to tell you over the wire—but it's cheap and it gives the composition the one quality it lacked, the one quality every other rubber substitute has lacked—lasting elasticity. Experts said that no one would ever be able to get it, but I have it—at last. It isn't hope or theory any longer. I have it. I actually have it. I mixed some of the composition last night, and this morning I made it up into strips, and it's even more elastic than real rubber, and can be manufactured for half the price

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of Para, think of that! I wouldn't believe my own senses. I've just come from having it tested and hurried into the office to telephone you the news. Isn't it wonderful?"

I shot a look at the man. What chance had he of inventing a rubber substitute, when the leading scientists all over the world had been endeavoring vainly for years to put one together? But, of course, Beatrice, being a woman, would believe him.

"No, I haven't told father, not yet," he continued, oblivious of my scornful look. "I wanted to tell you first, I——"

I swirled round in my office chair and called to Miss Walsh. I had heard enough of his silly, vapid, young enthusiasm. I called Miss Walsh a second time; this had never before been necessary; was she, too, womanlike, giving credit to his madness?

"No, father's got to wait. I want to bring it up to you first and demonstrate that I've really got it. It's one of the biggest contributions of our age to science. For years the word has been going around the street that the Rubber Trust would gladly pay four millions for a substitute as good as rubber. They deny it, but they would—yes, it's worth far more than that—but I shan't sell, I shall let father

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in on it, and he won't regard me as a fool any longer and try to get me into Wall Street. I'd much rather make my money through something useful like this than merely by juggling other people's money, wouldn't you?"

I signed to Miss Walsh that it was no use to try to talk against such a deluded maniac. I pushed back my chair and rose to my feet, trusting that he would notice how he was interfering with a sensible man's work.

"Yes. I'm coming. Now. At once."

He paid no attention to either of us. He grabbed his bag from my desk and was half way to the door before it appeared to dawn on him that we were even present.

"I—I—you heard!" he demanded, turning toward us with eyes that glittered like a maniac's.

I nodded indifferently and turned away to Miss Walsh.

"Ah, you don't believe it!" He seemed delighted rather than displeased.

"Yes, I believe that your hopes are elastic—more so probably than your rubber," I answered.

He laughed. "Yes, yes, I can understand why you should doubt it. I no longer mind that, now

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that I have the answer to it," he responded with disappointing good nature. "Wait. I'll show you. I'll convince you. It will take only a minute."

Much to my disgust he swept back, deposited his bag on my desk, and began fumbling around in it.

"Of course, if you have found a means of extracting the rubber from our rich men's consciences, you may have it, or something like it," I encouraged him.

He appeared not to notice my fling. "Here—here it is," he exclaimed, pulling several small strips of a reddish colored substance from his bag. "There! There! Examine it. Try it yourself." He threw a strip in front of me, another in front of Miss Walsh.

"Oh, I'll take your word for it," I said, pushing the strip aside to pick up some papers on which it fell.

"Try it—please," he requested, turning to Miss Walsh.

She picked up the strip thrown her and, one end in each hand, pulled. It stretched and when she released one end it snapped back.

"It's elastic all right, elastic of the most revenge-

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ful kind," she announced, rubbing the hand it had struck.

"There! Convinced?" Longstreet turned smilingly to me. "You saw, didn't you?"

"Yes, but how much real rubber did you put in it to make it stretch like that?"

"Not an ounce, not——" Longstreet stopped abruptly and looked at me, as if suddenly and for the first time he caught my antagonism. His mouth opened as if he intended to speak. Instead, he seized his bag from my desk and with a wave of his free hand plunged out of the office.

I took the strip he had left on my desk and dropped it into my waste-basket.

"You called me. Dictation?" inquired Miss Walsh, remaining standing.

"No—it's insufferably hot here, isn't it?" I demanded.

"Yes. Perhaps. Shall I open a window?"

"If you will." I began to perceive what an exhibition my feelings had made of me before her. "After so much hot air, don't you think it would be better?" I asked with hastily assumed jocularity.

She laughed with me and opened the windows. But when she returned she paused before my desk.

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"You don't like Mr. Longstreet, do you?" she inquired.

"No, that is——" I paused embarrassed. There was no explanation I could make.

She moved on a little. "You still don't object to my doing his letters?" she asked. "I'll give them up instantly if you do."

I assured her that I didn't. She accepted my statement. Fool that I was! It was not until long afterward that I had wit to think what it means when a woman takes a man's word against all the evidence!

I did not even dream what this meant that day. That day I had much ado to bring my jealousy within bounds, to speak to callers without snapping at them like a vicious dog. Whether or not Allan Longstreet was the man with Beatrice on the night of the murder, this last conversation had proved that he was on terms of the utmost intimacy with her, and he being the only son of a very rich man, oh, how I hated him! I was beside myself with jealousy. After my first anger passed and my brain began to work, suspicions groped their way into it. I made up my mind that he had forced his office on me for just this triumph, that his generosity had

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been all a sham, that he had planned all along to convince me in some such way as this of the hopelessness of my aspiration to Beatrice.

I had a glimpse of Beatrice on the stairs late that night when I forced myself to return to the house, but I could not speak to her. I passed into my own room without so much as a word. She must have just come from a whole afternoon and perhaps evening spent with him. The thought of that made it impossible for me to trust myself to say a word.

I slept ill. I pretended that an early engagement prevented me from staying to breakfast. And at the office I sank into my chair with a despair at the long day coming that I did my best to conceal.

It must have been toward noon when the door opened and I looked up to find Beatrice standing smilingly before my desk. I started. I couldn't help it, so sure was I that the vindictive feelings rankling in my mind must be visible. And before she could speak I simply had to let her realize that at last I knew who the man was she preferred to me.

"Mr. Longstreet isn't in, but if you will sit down he may be here at any time," I said.

She looked at me, her eyebrows lifted. "I came

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to see you, not Mr. Longstreet," she said slowly after a minute.

"Me? Ah, you have thought of something else that I can do for you?"

Again that lifting of the thick dark long lashes that no longer appeared quite so wonderful to me. "N-o," she said quietly.

In spite of myself my eyes dropped before hers. It enraged me. "Then why——" I demanded.

"I happened to be downtown on another matter," she said, ignoring my treatment, "and, we see so little of you at the house lately, I thought I would come in to thank you for both myself and Linda for your promptness."

"My promptness?"

"Yes, the promptness with which you see that all our wishes are carried out. We both appreciate it, I assure you. I wanted to tell you so. I had a feeling that our troubles of the past week might have made us seem heedless and ungrateful to you, and it hurt me to think that you might have such an impression when you have really been so kind and indulgent to us in every way."

I felt uneasy at her gratitude after my rude treatment. "I haven't done anything—anything that

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my duties as executor have not called on me to do," I waived.

"Perhaps not, but you have been so quick and prompt. I wanted you to know that we appreciate it."

"Prompt?"

"About the automobile."

"The automobile?"

"Yes, and the chauffeur. We hadn't even spoken to you about him."

I looked at her with amazement. Lurking in my mind was a new suspicion. Was she being sarcastic with me? But the suspicion could not gain ground before the calm, determined kindness in her look. "I—I guess I don't understand," I floundered.

She smiled. "You have done so much for us that I can understand why you shouldn't. But a few days ago we asked you for a car—now, do you understand?"

"A car? You mean an automobile?"

"Yes, and this morning without a word from you up it comes to the house ready for immediate use and with a chauffeur to take us wherever we want to go. Linda was speaking about it just before it arrived, wondering when it would come, and I had

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just told her that I didn't think you would be able to get one short of a few weeks when——"

At last I found my tongue. "But—but I haven't sent any automobile," I exclaimed.

"Then how——"

"Someone must have heard that you wanted one and sent it on trial."

"But——" She stopped, her lips parted with alarm.

"But what?"

"Why, the chauffeur told us distinctly that you had sent him and the car."

"I didn't. You must have misunderstood him."

"N-o, I heard him say it myself."

"Well, it doesn't matter."

"But it does!"

The alarm in her look and tone communicated itself to me. "Why?" I demanded.

"Because Linda went out to drive in it. Oh, why did I let her go out alone in it! I had an errand downtown and she wanted to go out along the Drive, so I saw her off in the new car and came downtown in the subway. I don't know what I was thinking of; I don't see why I didn't call you up and make sure it was all right; I shall never forgive

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myself if anything has happened to Linda." She had risen from her seat, and stood looking apprehensively out of the window, one hand behind her for support.

"Nothing has happened," I assured her, "nothing whatever has happened, except that probably some too eager automobile salesman has outwitted himself."

"I don't know. I don't know," she repeated dully. "Suppose——" she turned suddenly as if impelled to confide in me the nature of her fear; then, at my look, her purpose seemed as suddenly to leave her. She sighed and looked away. After a moment she suddenly straightened up. "I must go—I must go and find out," she said quickly and without another word she hurried out of my office.

Her fears seemed to me preposterous because unexplained, but I hurried away to luncheon in order to be present in case she telephoned later. When I returned another card was lodged against my inkstand. It read:

FOOLISH ANSWER No. 3

Women lose interest in dolls when they grow up,
but men—never!

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Somehow I fancied this referred to Beatrice. I frowned at Miss Walsh and tore it to pieces. I was at the other end of the office hanging up my hat when the telephone rang. Miss Walsh sprang to it ahead of me.

"It's she," she said in a queer tone and I realized I had been correct in my assumption.

Beatrice's voice was pitched in a key of alarm.

"Linda hasn't come home. She promised to be back by noon. It's after one now, and I am scared simply to death. What am I to do? Please tell me what to do?" she cried in a tone that trembled.

I did my best to calm her, told her that Linda might have driven further than she intended, might have lost sight of the time, or might have been delayed in getting back by the breaking down of the car.

"I know—I know—I've thought of all those things," she exclaimed unconvinced. "But what am I to do? Please tell me what to do."

"You can't do anything except to wait until she comes back and explains why she is late," I replied.

"Wait! Wait! I can't wait any longer."

"But what else is there to do?" I grew a little impatient at her unnecessary alarm.

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"I feel I ought to tell the police. I feel I——"

"What, and have them swarm up there with the reporters behind them? No, be patient. Wait until Miss Linda returns!" I expostulated.

"She isn't coming back! She isn't coming back! I'm sure of it," she cried.

"Why isn't she coming back?" I demanded.

She hesitated and then avoided answering my question. "She isn't coming back. I know it. That's all I can tell you. But I must have someone to help me find her. Mr. Trask! Where can I find him?"

"I don't know. He's away somewhere."

"Oh, why did I ever allow her to go out in that car alone?" Her self-reproach was bitter. "I might have known. I—oh, can't you find Mr. Trask for me?"

"I'm sorry, but I haven't the least idea where he is. Why alarm yourself so unnecessarily? Why do you think she isn't coming back?"

She did not answer.

"Why do you think she isn't coming back?" I persisted.

"I—oh, Mr. Swan, couldn't you come right up here?"

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"Yes—if it's necessary."

"Please don't be so cool about it! Oh, Mr. Swan, if you only knew! I have every reason to believe that Linda has been kidnapped."

"Kidnapped? By whom?"

"Please don't stop to ask questions. Please come right up here."

"All right, I'm coming."

I hung up the receiver and stared stupidly at the letters awaiting my signature. Kidnapped? But who would kidnap Linda Alster? I could find no answer, but Beatrice's clamorous certainty began to get to me, began to raise the possibility before me for the first time, and I wondered what I should do in case she had really been abducted. After all, what could I do except what I had advised Beatrice against doing? And if the police were called in—no, that must be avoided by all means. But what could I do? Taking down my coat, I paused midway and thought.

"Pleasure before business, I notice," commented Miss Walsh in a low voice.

It was the first time she had ever spoken sarcastically to me, though she was famous for her sharp tongue. I began to understand. But my mind

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was too taken up with the baffling task confronting me to suffer any delay or distraction. I pretended not to hear and continued my preparations for leaving the office. On my desk when I returned to it for a last look was another card:

FOOLISH ANSWER NO. 4

Anyone I don't like looks awful small to me, but —it's a poor match that won't light when it's scratched.

I turned it face down without looking at her. What was I to do about Linda's disappearance? Where was Trask? Detectives were always around when not needed and never when needed. I leaped toward the door and as I reached for the handle the door was suddenly opened right in my face. And in the entrance stood Trask.

XIII

TRASK surprised me by sharing Beatrice's alarm over the non-appearance of Linda.

He was eager for the details and reproached me for not asking Beatrice for a description of the chauffeur.

"A good description might have made me quite certain on one point," he stated. "The use of a cipher and the ruse of sending the violets addressed to Miss Beatrice made me suspect that Keith must be working with confederates. And now the employment of an automobile makes matters look still worse. You've noticed how much the most enterprising crooks are using automobiles lately, haven't you? This suggests even more strongly that, instead of having merely Keith to deal with, we may perhaps have to combat one or more of the shrewdest criminals in New York, one of those first to utilize each new invention, one of those who soon will be using monoplanes for second-story work on skyscrapers. But which one? That is what I would like to learn just as soon as I can." He noticed at

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once how his criticism annoyed me; he pacified me on our way uptown in the subway by reporting his discoveries regarding Keith.

"Well, Swan," he began, "you see before you a man who has served just about a week at hard labor. It was necessary to learn precisely what sort of a character we were after in this man Keith. I wanted his past in order to get an index to his habits and associates; given these one gains some notion of where to look for a man; and not so much as a start could I obtain from anyone at the house. The girls knew nothing; the servants knew nothing; I couldn't learn even from which employment agency he had come, nor how Miss Alster had happened to engage him as butler. All I had was an excellent description of his appearance put together from details supplied by them all.

"This sent me down first to police headquarters to learn if he had been 'mugged.' Virtually a day wasted there and nothing found. Two more days wasted in making a complete canvass of the employment agencies and nothing there. This threw me back on my last resource, the charity organizations. When you fail to find your man on the card lists of the active, professional criminals, you can

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frequently come upon him among the shiftless, apprentice criminals who work the charities. But I never resort to this until every other method has failed. Without a man's name or particular game it is a long and weary hunt among a forest of papers. And Keith I strongly suspected to be a newly assumed name.

"Four days at the charity societies groping wildly among confused papers setting forth the names and games of the half-rogues. Swan, a man never feels dirtier than after poring over old papers, buried in the settled dust of time. I have taken so many baths in the past four days that my skin feels worn thin. You know? Only your hands get soiled, but you feel dirty all over and wish you could wash inside as well as outside, externally, eternally. Four long, steady, endless days of that, but——" Trask laughed contentedly, "but something from it all at last."

"Ah, you found his record?"

"Yes, late yesterday afternoon. Not much, but enough to set me going right. Twenty years ago the Charity Organization began to receive a steady stream of inquiries about three forms of begging letters. The letters appeared to emanate from

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three different people, two men and one woman, as they were written invariably in three forms. The woman's letter always began, 'I know your tender womanly nature will answer the cry of a poor woman whose husband is disabled by accident and whose baby is crying for milk, and so forth'; one of the men's letters always began, 'I am in great trouble, a wife sick in confinement, a baby dead, and no money to bury it. I don't want my baby to go to the potter's field, and so forth'; and the other man's letters as inevitably opened, 'There is a story told about a shipwrecked sailor who felt he had a claim on God to hear his prayers because he troubled him so seldom,'—and then a humorous touch for a loan. But money in response to all three appeals was requested to be sent to the same rooming house on the Bowery. One of the Charity Organization's agents went down to investigate and found that one man and his wife were responsible for them all. They went by the name of Taylor. They had reams of paper, boxes of envelopes, blue-books, directories, newspapers, and were sending out begging letters by the dozens every day and using their son, a little boy of seven or eight, to help write them and to run errands.

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"Well, all the agent did was to throw the scare into them and take away the boy. That boy was turned over to one of the foundling asylums and brought up until he became old enough to earn his own living. That boy was Keith."

"Keith? The man who worked as butler at Miss Alster's? Impossible!"

"Not at all. Nothing is impossible. He worked for just two days as apprentice to a goldbeater, the job the foundling asylum secured for him, and then he vanished."

"Then how——"

"I'm coming to that. Ten years later one of the officials found him working as an omnibus, that is, a helper to the waiters at one of the big hotels, but as he seemed to be earning an honest living the charity agent let him alone. Yet more than a year and a half ago, running down another especially active and successful begging letter writer, they came upon this young man again. He said he had fallen sick and been forced to resort to writing begging letters for easy money until he could find another place as a waiter, but probably the blood of his shiftless parents was beginning to tell. However, the charity agent got him a position as footman with one of

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the wealthy families on lower Fifth Avenue; he worked there about two weeks, appeared to like the easy life, but at the end of that time kicked up his heels and disappeared again. That is the last record of Mr. Keith; there's a wide gap of nearly a year and a half between the time he left there and the time he went to work as butler for Miss Alster, about which nothing whatever is known."

"But what became of the parents?"

"After the agent threw that scare into them they packed up and decamped, to another city probably, until things blew over. Four years later they were run down here again playing the same old game. The woman had a two-year-old baby with her that the society took away; she seemed willing enough to let some one else bring up her little girl. There was a reason, but I won't go into that now. Then they vanished again. Five years later reports came in about them from Boston, where they were playing the same old game. No record since, but I'm having the entire family looked into further and expect more news about them any day."

We were on an express that had just drawn out from the Fourteenth Street station.

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"And all this makes you more eager than ever to lay hands on Keith?" I inquired, to make talk.

Trask merely laughed and nodded his head in silence.

I pondered over the strange story of shiftless, aimless lives he had told me. From time to time I glanced at him, but he seemed engrossed in some problem of his own. Our express train passed station after station. I found myself looking at the passengers in a local we had caught up with and were slowly passing. Suddenly I made a grab for Trask's arm.

"Look! Quick!" I cried.

"What is it? Be careful," he warned. Instead of looking toward the local he turned toward me, shutting off my sight of it with his whole body.

"What are you doing? It's Keith, there in that local we're passing," I protested.

"Yes, I hoped as much, but there's no need of warning him," he replied, continuing to keep his body in the way. "Did he see you?"

"No, but——"

"What station was that we just passed?" he interrupted.

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"The Twenty-eighth Street, but are you going to let him get away like this?" I expostulated.

He did not answer. In a moment he outlined his plans.

"Go to the rear door of this train," he ordered, "and the moment it stops hurry across and down the platform where the local will pull in. Station yourself where the last car of the local will stop. As soon as it draws in walk up along the train looking at those who get off and those inside. If you see him inside get on and shadow him. If you see him get off follow him from here. But above all keep on walking forward."

"Why?" I asked.

"Later. We're drawing in to the Grand Central stop. Hurry now and do just what I told you." He had already risen; as I rose he gave me a shove toward the rear door of our car and he himself ran toward the door at the other end.

The local came shooting into the station and I did precisely as Trask had ordered. Running into people, being shoved this way and that, I hurried along the platform, looking from the people on it to the passengers on the train until my head swung as on a pivot. But it was slow work, and before I had

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gone half the length of the train its doors began to slam and I realized it would be off with only half of the cars as yet covered. I hesitated before one of the last doors remaining open, wondering what I was to do in such a situation. The fact that the guard was about to shut the door convinced me that I had better get on the train before it pulled away. I made a leap toward the closing door and was brought abruptly back by a strong grip on my arm.

"Well, you didn't see him, did you?" inquired Trask, releasing his hold.

"No, but how do you know he was not on one of the cars further ahead?" I demanded.

"Don't worry about those. I covered them," he assured me.

"Yes, but you've never seen Keith. How would you know him? That was the reason I wanted you to look at him on the train."

"No, I've never seen him, but——" Trask laughed confidently.

"You surely don't rely upon picking him out among dozens of passengers merely by a description."

"Why not? Listen! Perhaps you can add some-

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thing to the details already gathered on him. Five feet ten; weight 170 to 180; light brown hair, gray eyes; fair complexion; small, regular teeth; has waiter's walk; left eyelid droops a little; right shoulder a good inch lower than left—if you had all those details right in the front of your mind and were trained to do it, don't you think you could pick out your man from the description?"

I stood amazed at the quickness with which he had rattled off the long list of details; his assurance no longer seemed so childish; I had not a word to say.

"At least, I can promise you that no man answering that description was in the first four cars of that local when it drew into this station," Trask went on. "Only one thing could have happened; he got off at the Thirty-third street station."

"What shall we do about it?" I asked humbly.

"Nothing just now." Trask took my arm. "Come, we might as well go up and take the surface car to our destination."

"And let him get away?"

"He can't get away any more than he has already; and you forget that Miss Beatrice is waiting for us," rejoined Trask easily.

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Marveling at the ease with which he took our loss, I submitted and followed him upstairs to the surface car which bore us to the residence of the late Miss Alster.

Beatrice was in the hall when we entered, and one look at her face was enough to tell me that she had not yet heard from Linda. Her agitated look brightened a little when she looked beyond me and observed Trask following.

"Oh, I'm so glad that you have come, too," she exclaimed, reaching impulsively for his hand.

"Probably you don't need me, now that Mr. Trask is here," I ventured with slightly more sarcasm than I intended.

"Oh, you know I didn't mean anything like that," she said, looking at me reproachfully before leading us both into the reception room. Here she told the whole story of Linda's disappearance again, and not to Trask, but to me. I felt my importance renew itself; I made up my mind that at last I had learned the way to treat her so that she would better appreciate me.

Trask, after learning that she could give him no definite description of the chauffeur, listened to her without a single interruption. In fact, it was some

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time before he broke with a question the silence that followed her story.

"So you feel positive that she has been kidnapped, do you?" he inquired at last, and with a quiet significance that was not to be overlooked.

"I—I—oh, yes, I feel sure of it," she faltered, blushing.

"So do I."

Trask's curt, decisive statement made us both start. Before we could express surprise he caught her up with another question:

"And now, whom do you suspect of kidnapping her?"

"I—I——" Beatrice stopped short and appeared too confused to continue.

"You don't dare to tell?"

Beatrice after a sigh slowly shook her head.

"It would betray a secret you have sworn not to tell?"

Again that deep sigh and the slow shake of her head.

"You fear she was kidnapped by Keith, don't you?"

Beatrice gave a little gasp and shrank away from him.

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"So do I." Trask read her unintentional acknowledgment as I had read it. "That's all. We won't annoy you further, Miss Beatrice," he said quickly and in a softer tone. He turned to me and made talk until she quite recovered from her dismay.

"Please, Mr. Trask, do what you can, even if I can't tell you any more, you will, won't you?" she begged him in a voice that trembled.

"Yes, my dear girl, don't worry."

Her appeal to him rather than to me irritated me again. I decided that now was the time to do a little detective work myself.

"We shall need money," I declared, and, despite Trask's frown, went on, "Can you let us have some of the thousand dollars I got for you the other day?"

"I—I have only a few dollars of it left," Beatrice's long lashes dropped over her eyes. "I'm sorry it—it is all gone."

My eyes swept to Trask and there was triumph in them, but he was walking away toward the front of the room. Was he angry with me or had he turned his back only to hide his satisfaction at the acknowledgment I had forced from her? In a moment I perceived another possible reason for his withdrawal.

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"I am sorry if I intrude," exclaimed a new voice behind me, "but if you want money I can let you have all you need."

I turned. In the doorway stood Allan Longstreet. He was looking not at me, but at Beatrice. I looked from Beatrice to him. As he advanced toward her with a look on his face that seemed too assured of his welcome, my anger got the better of me.

"If you'll excuse me, I think it would be much better if——" I began with open hostility.

"No, I sent for Mr. Longstreet," interrupted Beatrice firmly.

"Oh! You sent for him?"

"Yes, I feared you wouldn't——" her hesitation was as insulting as if she hadn't corrected herself—"wouldn't be able to come soon, so I sent for Mr. Longstreet, too—afterward. I couldn't stand the suspense—I—it isn't his fault—if it's anyone's fault it's——"

"It isn't anyone's fault," interrupted Longstreet, taking her hand, "and if anyone considers my arrival an intrusion and objects to my joining in the hunt for Miss Linda, I can easily enough remedy that."

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"How?" I burst out, still further enraged at his holding her hand.

"By conducting a search of my own," he replied coolly, though his gray eyes glinted angrily.

I looked at Trask for encouragement. His eyes were on the floor and refused to meet mine. I had a feeling that he, too, was against me.

"In that case," I exclaimed, "I think that I also can take up the hunt alone." With a sweeping look at them all which provoked no objections, I turned on my heel and left the room.

With a feeling that everybody's hand was raised against me, I returned to my office and sought to distract my mind with work put aside. But pressing matters were soon attended to, and I felt Miss Walsh's eyes upon me perceiving a sense of outrage no longer to be concealed. With the first batch of letters she brought me was a card on which was written in her hand,

I'm sorry

I pretended not to have seen it. I had returned to my office for distraction, but this was not the sort my mind welcomed then. I attended to a few mat-

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ters. I fled to the Waldorf for dinner. Here, quite alone, getting a bitter satisfaction from my own loneliness, I indulged my feelings. On me was a tingling rage at the small part in affairs I was permitted to take, and from this arose a sudden determination to show my power. Beatrice, Longstreet, Trask—all should reckon with me from now on. I lighted a cigar, the strongest to be had, and started at a furious pace toward the Thirty-third Street exit of the hotel. And then through the revolving door I saw someone—someone at sight of whom all my seething, undirected impulses crystallized into a single purpose.

It was Keith whom I had seen pass that door. I gave him a few minutes' start and then followed, taking the other side of the street. He was walking bent forward as if his arms were loaded down. He looked back once and I dived into a doorway, congratulating myself upon having escaped unnoticed. From this point of vantage, through the two show windows of the store I saw him turn into the basement of one of the houses lying midway in the block between the Waldorf and Broadway. I had run him down, I had run Keith down! I waited a discreet interval before emerging to inspect the house

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he had entered. It proved to be one of a short row of ordinary, old-fashioned, brownstone front residences left among the neighboring skyscrapers by the uptown flight of New York's inhabitants. I passed it again and again, first cautiously on the other side of the street, and then, as I grew bolder, upon the side on which it was located. The basement door and windows, I noted, were heavily barred; at all the windows hung heavy lace curtains through which I ought to have seen lights if the house were occupied, yet not the faintest gleam could I detect; otherwise the house differed not in any respect from thousands of others of its kind.

But if the suspicions of Beatrice and Trask were correct, there, in this house, at this very moment, Linda might be held against her will. And I—I was the only one who knew—the one who must act. I roamed up and down the street, never taking my eyes from the house, and trying to determine what action to take. A weak impulse to call on Trask for aid I choked down. No, this was my find. I would show him and the others of what caliber I was made. Gradually into my thoughts worked a fear that the man I had followed might perhaps not be Keith. Also, if it were, he might observe me walk-

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ing up and down the street. To avoid this, I slipped deep into the doorway of a skyscraper diagonally opposite to prepare some plan for gaining entrance to the house. And then, as I stood there, my eyes and whole attention directed across the street, the door directly behind me must have been suddenly opened, for two hands clutched me by the shoulders, and before I could utter a cry I was forcibly pulled inside and the door closed in my face.

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WITH a quick swing I jerked free from the hands and turned, facing my assailant.

With the same continuous movement I closed my fists and set my body in an attitude of self-defense. But by this time my eyes recognized the man who had pulled me in there; and my arms fell supinely to my sides.

"Excuse the rough handling," said Trask, smiling, "only if we had allowed you to parade up and down there much longer Keith would certainly have noticed you, if he hasn't already."

"Oh, then you have run him down, too?" I demanded.

"Picked up his trail this afternoon, ran him down within ten minutes, and now we've got an office upstairs where we can watch in safety just what's going on across the street."

"We?" I demanded, stifling my disappointment.

"Come upstairs and get our point of view," responded Trask, avoiding my question. "You won't

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mind climbing four flights? The elevator doesn't run nights after seven."

He hurried away up the dark stairway that ran around the elevator well and I followed, my feelings mixed, a feeling of satisfaction at having his aid in the affair at hand mingling with one of disappointment that he should have run down Keith ahead of me after all. But my feelings were no longer mixed when I entered the office on the fourth floor to which he led me. There I found a man whom, in the half light coming from the street, I recognized to be Longstreet, and all my earlier animosity against him resumed its sway over me.

He was standing just away from the plate glass front window with opera glasses at his eyes watching the house opposite. At my entrance he turned and spoke to me affably enough, but victors can afford to be affable.

"Why didn't you tell me he was here?" I demanded of Trask in a low voice.

Longstreet must have heard, but he paid no attention. As for Trask, he merely looked at me without answering.

"Can't you dispense with him, now that I'm here to help you?" I persisted.

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Trask took me by the arm and led me aside to the far end of the office. "Considering that he first located Keith and also, at my advice, hired this office, I don't think your suggestion sounds very reasonable," whispered Trask. "Now, be good." He turned and left me.

"We're all here with the same object. So let's at least be friends until the hunt is over," called out Longstreet in a voice conciliating enough to allow me a dignified escape from the disagreeable situation into which my jealousy had forced me.

"But why wait? Why not call the police?" I demanded.

"No evidence. We don't yet know that Miss Linda is there," responded Trask.

"There are three of us. Why not go and find out?"

"Just how would you suggest doing that?" asked Trask.

"Why! Suppose you and I go right up to the front door and ring, while Mr. Longstreet stays outside watching the basement door. When the door is opened we surely can force our way in."

"Do you know anything about that house?" retorted Trask. "Well, I do. It's a temporarily de-

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sented gambling house known as the Iron Door. That door would never be opened. They would merely look us over through some peephole and escape by the way the gamblers used to take."

"They?" I inquired. "Is there more than Keith there?"

"He's the only man we've seen enter the house," replied Trask, "but Keith, according to my notion, is not quite the caliber of man to dare carry out an undertaking of this sort alone. And the work so far implies that he has the aid or at least the advice of more intelligent and skilled criminals. It's unfortunate that Miss Beatrice's description of the chauffeur who drove off with Miss Linda wasn't definite enough to give me a clew to the identity of one of them. But that there are more than Keith concerned in this I am confident. In fact, he recently carried sufficient food into the house for four or five people, judging from the bundles."

"There must be some way," I complained, advancing toward the window. Rebelling at the way all my suggestions were turned down, I studied the house. "Why not try to effect an entrance through the skylight?" I demanded.

"Barred, unquestionably," responded Trask.

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"We don't know that. Look at that house next door. One can tell by the light in the lower hall and the unlocked outer door that it is divided into apartments; and I've just seen the janitor go out. Why not go up to its roof and try to enter through the skylight of this one?" I had warmed to my suggestion and my voice was growing louder and more determined.

"Ssssh!" cautioned Longstreet, "if I'm not mistaken someone is coming out."

We drew near the window. It was Keith. We watched him leave the house, hurry along the street and jump into a taxi near the McAlpin.

"Now's our chance," I cried excitedly.

Neither of them said anything.

"Do you mean to tell me you're going to let a chance like this get away from you?" I demanded angrily.

Longstreet looked toward Trask as if for orders. Trask neither moved nor said a word.

"Do you know what you look like to me? You look like a pair of cowards," I scoffed, jerking away from them toward the door.

"Hold on there, where are you going?" demanded Trask, turning alertly toward me.

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"I'm going to try it myself, alone," I announced.

"Don't be so idiotic," Trask urged, "we don't even know that she's in that house. And, if she is, you may be sure that the heavy men in this plot have been left behind on guard. If we go over there and bungle we'll only succeed in warning them or putting her in greater danger."

"Well, I for one don't intend to stay here and look on like a mere spectator," I stormed.

"Yes, there are three of us against any who may be there, why not make a try?" chimed in Longstreet.

"Well, have your own way." Trask sighed. "But wait a minute." He withdrew to a corner of the office, opened a bag, and in the dark appeared to be putting something about his body under his coat.

"What are you doing? Putting on armor?" I demanded, feeling more jocular now that my suggestion was to be acted upon.

"I'm preparing to save your enterprise from almost certain defeat," replied Trask, and would not answer another question.

We made a *détour* up the street, crossed to the other side and entered the apartment house next

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door. Making as little noise as possible, we ascended the stairs and gained the roof without difficulty.

"There! You see how easy it was," I could not forbear exclaiming triumphantly.

"Yes, but now suppose you go over and examine your skylight," retorted Trask, standing aside and awarding me the right of way.

I stepped over the low parapet between the roofs of the two buildings: Longstreet followed, but Trask remained behind, leaning against the parapet, merely watching us.

I hurried across the roof, followed by Longstreet. There was no skylight. The projection above the roof which I had taken for one proved to be merely a hatchway with a hard steel cover. I tried to raise this. It would not budge. Longstreet and I got down on our knees, tried the corners, ends, sides, without discovering an aperture into which a finger could be wedged. The edges of the steel plate had been turned in, were fitted so closely within the outer steel frame that it was long before we learned this discouraging fact. We attempted to shake it. It was immovable. The crack between the plate and its frame was so narrow that we could not force a knife-blade into it.

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"Too bad," exclaimed Longstreet, and I hated him for his sympathy. I rose to my feet with an oath. Trask had joined us. He asked no questions and gave the skylight but a cursory glance.

"Come! Now we'll make a sane attempt to get into the house," he announced. He led the way to the rear of the roof, got down on it, and wormed his head and shoulders so far over the edge that both Longstreet and I threw ourselves on his legs to keep him from falling into the dark abyss beyond. For a long time he hung there reconnoitering and then called softly for us to pull him back. We did so with relief and with alacrity.

"No lights; I guess we can make a try," he announced. He unbuttoned his coat and began to unwind something from about his body. It proved to be a rope, small but strong. He tied one end around the base of the nearest chimney, trailed it along to the rear edge of the roof and then began to tie knots tightly at regular intervals in the short length that remained.

This completed, he pulled the rope taut, lowered the knotted end over the projecting edge of the roof so that it hung directly before one of the windows on the top floor, and with a "Now, don't

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cut the rope on me," disappeared over the edge.

We bent over and watched his descent with bated breath. He was swinging himself in and out over that dark empty space in an attempt to lodge his feet firmly on the sill of the window. Once or twice his feet gained the sill, but his body swung away, he lost his foothold, and we feared to see him fall the forty feet to the brick-paved yard below. It seemed hours before he succeeded in landing upon that sill.

"Shall we come too?" I called after him softly, hoping he would deny us the chance and admit us by the hatchway.

He did not answer. We saw him raise the window and vanish inside the house without making a sound.

Longstreet and I drew in and looked at each other.

"Well?" he asked.

"You can do what you please, but I'm going," I responded with an inflection that dared him follow.

"We're both going. I took that for granted. I merely wanted to learn your desire as to which one of us should go next," he retorted coldly.

I took a deathlike grip on the rope and scram-

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bled over the edge, praying mutely that nothing would give way, lowering myself hand by hand over the dizzying space with my heart in my mouth. It was a matter of only moments before my feet touched the window sill and Trask held them there until I could creep safely inside, but when my feet reached the floor I was glad to lean against the wall of the room. I found I had been holding my breath; the faint feeling did not leave me until Longstreet crept through the window and I felt his eyes upon me.

We drew near Trask in the dark room, even I by now quite reconciled to have him take charge of the undertaking. Suddenly we caught the glint about the room of his electric flash lamp. It flashed on a bed—unoccupied—on a bureau, chairs, and finally sprayed a narrow path of light across to the door to show us the way. We crossed the room, and waited for Trask. He joined us. After listening at the keyhole for a long time he carefully turned the knob and opened the door a few inches; and at that moment a series of sounds came to us from the house below that made my heart stop beating and caused a cold coating of perspiration to break out all over my body.

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It is far easier to describe our sensations than that terrifying series of sounds. They were like nothing we had ever heard before; they left our minds whirling in vacancy; they sent our imaginations groping for dreadful, unheard-of things. As Trask unlatched the door the first sounds that came up to us through the dark house were such as might have been made in a struggle between human beings; then came a cry—in a woman's voice—followed by a thud as of a falling body; then in quick succession, the thunderous clank of iron drawn over iron, the resounding clang of steel meeting steel. And then, before our minds could ascribe meanings to these sounds, there came a heavy hiss, a slow swish and the suction below of the air in the house.

We all shrank back and away from the door, and felt through the dark for each other. That awful hiss, that terrifying suction, and the deadly silence that succeeded them—what could they mean? I could hear the others breathing deeply. And then Trask broke the spell by throwing open the door and running out in the hall.

We followed Trask rather than to be left alone. The hall was unlighted and dark as a cavern. We came upon him peering through the projecting lat-

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tice-work down a deep shaft to the bottom of the house. Far below was a dim light, but all the three floors between were dark as night. And not a sound save our own breathing!

Trask groped around a while in the dark and listened, before he dared make use of his electric flash lamp. Then he discovered a stairway that wound down around the enclosed shaft. Trask started down it, whispering for us to follow. Down one flight, two flights, through the dark we crept, making as little noise as possible. On the second floor we saw that a dim light burned in the hall below, that this was the light which we had discerned in the enclosed shaft, also we perceived that this shaft, which we had been unable to explain in a residence of this sort, was nothing more or less than an elevator well.

The elevator had stopped at the second floor and was unoccupied. Following Trask's lead we descended to the first floor. Trask pointed silently but significantly to the inner front doors. They were of heavy iron, hung on hinges embedded in concrete, and with three large bolts to make them impregnable. The three bolts were drawn; through the slightly unlatched iron doors we could see the

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ordinary dark wooden door that masked this extraordinary defense.

"Have they got away?" I whispered, pointing to the unlatched iron doors.

Trask shook his head as if he would not say. With a sign warning us to be silent, he entered the large front room on that floor. We found no one there; we found no one in the large room opening out of it to the rear; and we regathered in the hall to descend to the basement.

Again Trask cautioned us to be silent, and he evidently looked for trouble below, for I noticed that he shifted his flash lamp to his left hand and now carried an automatic pistol in his right. Longstreet, following, also carried an automatic. I wondered if Trask had given it to him.

We crept down the stairs to that basement with a feeling that the least noise might result in our being shot. The door of the nearest room was open. Trask whisked through the lighted hall into it and was lost in the dark. In a moment he came out shaking his head. It was the same with each room on that floor. Not a person was to be found in any of them.

Trask came out of the last of them with a puzzled

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look on his face and no longer walking on tiptoe. I guessed his thoughts. "We're too late, they've got away?" I prophesied.

"Perhaps, but nearly all the food has been eaten, showing that several people must have been here earlier." He shook his head and led the way back upstairs. We returned to the front room on the first floor, and Trask astonished me by switching on the electric lights.

"Won't they see these lights and keep away, instead of coming back?" I remonstrated.

"What, see lights from the street in a gambling house? Suppose you take a look at those windows," responded Trask with a chuckle.

I went to them. This side of the heavy lace curtains to be seen from the street were heavy, bolted steel shutters fitting into the window frames so tightly that not a crack was left for the egress of light; and yet inside these were first a black and then a white shade, and then again expensive lace hangings. No light could possibly pierce these. And forcing an entrance through one of those front windows would require much time and the right tools.

I turned and examined the room; it was furnished

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lavishly yet with taste; one would never have suspected that this was the reception room in a gambling house. But not so the large rear room on that floor and the two large rooms on the floor above to which we proceeded. On the walls of these were expensive nudes in oils and water colors, indicating that it was a resort solely for men. Among these pictures I noticed a beautiful Henner, nude yet unerringly chaste, and out of keeping with the other paintings. Thick, velvety carpets covered the floors; there were glittering, ostentatious chandeliers and beautiful rich hangings at the windows, but for furniture nothing except little clusters of cane-seated chairs in corners, which contrasted strangely with the costly carpets and hangings and chandeliers.

"They're ready to open up again just as soon as this reform wave is over and they believe it is safe," proffered Trask.

We searched all the rooms, halls, closets on the lower three floors; we searched the top floor, without finding human beings or traces of human beings. I was relieved; but Trask seemed to take his disappointment deeply to heart. He moved away from us toward the door of the room by which we had gained entrance.

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"At least this saves us the danger of climbing out by the way we got in," I commented, shivering at the thought of making our way up that knotted rope over the projecting edge of the roof. "If there is no one here, we can leave like gentlemen by the front door."

Trask dropped the handle of the door and turned toward us.

"Not without a scuffle," he announced.

"Scuffle?" I demanded, alarmed by the brisk change in his tone.

"Yes." He smiled grimly. "Since we left it, this door has been locked."

I stopped him as he was passing by me in the hall.

"Why, that means ——" I blurted and stopped, staggered by the possibilities.

"That means," announced Trask, "that someone is in this house, that someone has come up here while we were downstairs and locked this door, blocking our avenue of escape. And in all likelihood," he went on calmly, "he or they are now hiding somewhere downstairs; and we shall have to fight our way out by the front door." He turned out the hall light.

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Prepared to give battle, Trask and Longstreet leading the way with their automatics, we retreated downstairs, Longstreet and I remaining in the halls to make sure that no one stole by us upstairs while Trask once again searched the rooms. But room by room and floor by floor, we went through that entire house again from top floor to basement without discovering a living person.

"Well, whoever locked that door must have slipped out while we were wasting time in some of the empty rooms," I ventured, as we started back up the basement stairs.

"Ssssh!" Trask, who was leading, stopped midway on the basement stairs and signed for silence. We listened. The faint muffled sound of an electric buzzer came to us from somewhere on the floor above. Trask listened until it stopped, then with a whispered adjuration to follow and to make no noise tiptoed up the rest of the stairs. At their top we stopped and listened for the sound to be renewed. Instead we heard the click of a key in the lock of the front door. We drew back into the shadows at the head of the stairs and waited. In a moment two people entered. By the dim light we could see that one was a woman. She wore a

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heavy chiffon veil about her hat and head. She stood shrinking against the inner door, her hand to her mouth, as if desiring yet fearing to make an outcry, the while the man with her turned to close the door.

We heard the outer door close. Trask and Longstreet, as if by a prearranged signal, sprang toward her. But before they had gone a yard along that front hall, the door of the hall closet midway in their course swung open, two men sprang out and closed with them.

For a moment I stood staring at the four men struggling wildly in the middle of the hall. When I looked past I noticed that the other man had reopened the front door and flown. The girl still stood staring with manifest astonishment and alarm at the struggle going on in the hall between us. Suddenly she, too, turned and fled.

I ran through the two rooms to the hall beyond. One glance showed me that Trask had straightened out his man on the floor and was now going to the aid of Longstreet. I turned and followed the girl.

As I reached the sidewalk, I looked up and down the street. A woman disappearing into a taxi near the McAlpin was my only clew. I ran after her.

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The chauffeur of the nearest taxi seemed strangely slow at getting my orders to follow her taxi which was already turning the corner, but at last I made him understand. I jumped inside without paying attention to the patter of feet behind me. It wasn't necessary. Before I could close the door, it was jerked from my hand and first Trask and then Longstreet scrambled into the vehicle with me.

"You—you did just right, Swan," panted Trask.

"Thank you," I said caustically.

Our taxi swung out of Thirty-third Street into Broadway. At the next cross street our driver advanced nearly to the car track, stopped, peered ahead and to the right before finally turning east on Thirty-fourth Street.

"Has—has he lost them?" panted Longstreet.

"No. No. Wait a minute," exclaimed Trask, his eyes glued on our chauffeur.

We flew along Thirty-fourth Street. At Fifth Avenue again our chauffeur slowed up, looked about and then swerved north on the Avenue. He swept up the deserted Avenue at a speed showing his intention of overhauling two automobiles far ahead. Beyond Forty-second Street he quietly turned and nodded his head to Trask.

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"It's all right. Have you shown him anything?" demanded Trask.

"Shown him anything?" I exclaimed, not understanding what he meant.

For answer Trask drew a ten-dollar bill from his pocketbook, spread it out against the front window of the taxi and then knocked.

The chauffeur turned, grinned, and then nodded his head. Soon he slowed up a trifle and appeared to allow a slightly longer distance between our taxi and the one ahead.

"Now, he's all right," exclaimed Trask paying no more attention to him. Longstreet and I were too engrossed in keeping our eyes on the taxi ahead to find anything to talk about. In silence we sped on for block after block along the smooth asphalt.

"Hullo!" exclaimed Trask finally as our taxi followed the other one into Seventy-eighth Street, "it begins to look to me as if Mr. Keith had given up the fight and was taking Miss Linda home. But nevertheless, I want to have a few words with that young man before he leaves."

The taxi ahead of us drew up before Miss Alster's house. Our own stopped a short distance away. We jumped out; Trask thrust the banknote into

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our chauffeur's hand, then we hurried along the sidewalk. As we drew near, we saw the woman disappear into the Alster house. We ran to the taxi for Keith. It was empty.

Dismayed, we ran up the steps and I opened the front door with my latchkey. In the front hall stood the woman we had followed, the heavy chiffon veil just unwound from her head. At our entrance she turned and looked at us. It was not Linda; it was Beatrice.

XV

WHAT!"

"In the name of Heaven!"

Trask was the only one of us not to confess his surprise; the only one, that is, save Beatrice, who stood regarding us quietly as if surprised by nothing except our surprise.

"But where's Keith?"

"Yes, what became of Keith?" I cried, not feeling satisfied to see Longstreet usurp the whole center of the stage.

"Why, he——" Beatrice stopped and bit her lip. "What makes you ask me that?" she demanded suddenly.

"Why, he took you to see Linda, didn't he?" asked Trask, speaking for the first time and with a carelessness that disarmed her suspicions.

"Yes—yes, but I was asked not to tell anyone that," protested Beatrice, and then, perceiving that she had unintentionally admitted it, she inquired, "but—but how did you know it?"

In the sudden mêlée, and in the dim light of

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the back hall at the Iron Door, she had evidently failed to recognize a single one of us. Longstreet and I both were about to break out into explanations and further questions, when Trask silenced us with a gesture.

"Never mind about how we know," he replied smilingly, "we won't waste time going into that now. The important thing is that we're all trying to find Miss Linda, and you're going to help us in every way that you can, aren't you?"

"I—I don't know." She seemed much more confused by Trask's friendly tone than by our questions.

"You don't know what?"

"I don't know that Linda wants to be found now."

"Oh!" Trask paused. "Well, of course, that puts a decidedly different light on it. But perhaps you'll explain so that we won't waste any more time trying to find her."

"I don't think it is necessary for you to look for her any longer." Beatrice smiled.

"You mean that you prefer that we should not?"

"Yes."

"Very well, but aren't you going to tell us what

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you have seen or heard or learned that has made you change your mind?"

Her dark young face clouded and she looked at him in silence as if earnestly considering whether she might not do this. And Trask, seeing that she was wavering, went on:

"It seems to me that this is the least you can do for us in the circumstances. Remember, it is entirely due to you that we dropped everything else and started out to find her. We had no especial curiosity as to where she was nor had we any particular fear for her safety until you yourself aroused it in us. But now that you have aroused this fear, we have a right, haven't we, to learn what has removed all your fear?"

"I—I——" she stopped, but the startled look on her face showed that her fear was not wholly a matter of the past.

"Tell us, tell us," pleaded Trask, "we may be able to help you a great deal and——"

"I wonder?" she was weakening.

"And—" Trask's tone was astonishingly sympathetic—"and, if you wish us to regard whatever you say as confidential, you can rely on us to do that, can't you? Don't you think we can help you?"

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Don't you think you had better tell us at least this?"

"I will," she cried impulsively and then as suddenly, "No, wait."

It was the rattle of the taxi drawing up before the door outside that had so suddenly changed her purpose. We looked at her a moment, then Trask went to the door and opened it just as the bell sounded.

We were all looking at that door as if its opening would solve the mystery of her attitude. I don't know whom the others expected to see standing outside, but I looked for Keith or, failing him, at least Linda. As a matter of fact, it was only a mite of a messenger boy, chewing gum, and bearing in his hand a letter.

"Alster?" The mite of a boy had a skyscraper of a voice.

But Beatrice had hurried to the door, too. She took the letter from Trask almost as soon as it touched his hand. And she opened it nervously by the stairs, away from us all, as if she feared oversight.

"Any answer?" yelled the messenger boy.

"Better come in, sonny, before the society with

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the long name notices you are out so late," advised Trask.

"Huh!" The boy's scorn was scathing and, not neglecting his gum, he looked us all over clustered there in the hall, with suspicious, grinning glances, until Beatrice finished and stated that there would be no reply.

Trask let the messenger boy out and turned to find Beatrice slowly starting up the stairs with the note held tightly in her hand.

"But—but Miss Alster!" he called, and then, as she turned, "you were about to tell us something, weren't you?"

"I'm very sorry," she paused, but there was no longer any wavering in her manner, "but I have thought better of it."

Trask went directly to her, stood at the bottom of the staircase looking up at her, his voice grown hard. "You mean you no longer intend to tell us why you want us to stop looking for Miss Linda?"

"No." Her voice, if not so cold, was quite as determined as his.

"Ah, that note has changed your intention?"

"I haven't said that."

"No, but your actions have." I had never seen

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Trask treat her so sternly. "Miss Alster, the time has passed for any more cross purposes of this sort. I believe that the notes you have received from Miss Linda are either forged or——"

"No. They can't be."

"Or else she has been forced to write them. Have you thought of that?"

"Yes."

"But you don't believe it?"

"No."

"Then why all this secrecy? Why is it necessary for her to hide herself away from us?"

"I can't tell you."

"She is in the gravest danger and you——"

"She is in no danger at all if we only let her alone, and do as she asks."

"Tell us. Convince us. That is all that is necessary."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"I haven't the right."

Trask went up a step toward her. "You have the right. You have the right to break any promise that keeps her in jeopardy. I know more about this situation than you do. I have to. And I know

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that at this very minute she is running a great risk, and for some probably utterly silly reason is putting her very life in danger and——”

“No. She is safe. I know it. Her brother——”

Linda's brother! And who was Linda's brother? Beatrice must have seen the astonishment this news created in us. She must also have realized how impossible it would be for her now to retrieve her slip of tongue. She stopped, her face flushed, and she sighed deeply. For a moment she lingered there on the stairs studying us hopelessly. But at Trask's first question she turned and fled.

“No, no, I can't answer another single question,” she cried with determination.

We heard her run up the other flight of stairs, enter her room and close and lock the door.

“But who—whom did she mean by Linda's brother?” I burst out.

“Whom could she mean but Keith?” responded Trask. He still stood motionless at the foot of the stairs as if the news forced him to take apart and reassemble his secret conclusions. But, when at last he turned toward us, his manner showed that he had arrived at a decision.

“The fact that Keith claims to be Linda's brother

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explains a lot without explaining enough," he announced. "But, if she relies on that fact to insure Linda's safety, she is mad, stark, staring mad, and we must act at once to save her."

"But if Keith is Linda's brother he certainly won't permit anyone to harm her? What motive would he have to allow that?" I protested.

Trask looked at me. "Do you remember that I marveled at the wiliness and boldness of this whole game? Do you remember that it seemed to me to be vastly beyond the depth and courage of Keith? Keith is only a weak, shallow criminal. Keith never would have dared to kidnap Linda. Keith never would have had the brains or training to think out a scheme like this. Well, when those two gunmen popped out of the closet on us, I understood."

"Gunmen!" I exclaimed.

"Yes, two of the worst in the business," responded Trask. "Ike the Nailer has shot more men and got away with it than any other gunman in New York, and I didn't need to look at the other man to guess who he was. Lew the Blood and he always work together. Lew does the head-work and Ike the gunplay; and they're a cruel pair

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to get any heedless young girl like Linda in their power. I was weak. I was an imbecile not to have the common sense to wait until I was sure Linda was in that house before we went into it. Then we wouldn't all have run away after another girl thinking she was Linda." Trask sighed.

I felt Trask's implied criticism of an action which I had forced upon him. "Then you still think that Linda is there?"

"Where else can she be?"

"We searched the house from cellar to garret without finding any trace of her."

"Yes, and we did that without discovering the gunmen until they became good and ready to show themselves. No, we gained absolutely nothing by stealing in. We broke in before we knew what we were doing; we accomplished nothing except to warn them; and now the girl we wanted to help is more utterly in the power of a pair of unscrupulous criminals than before. We don't know what they may do with her. We must get back there before they have time to move her somewhere else."

"But surely her brother can be trusted to protect her."

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"Protect her!" Trask's voice was scornful. "That's precisely what Miss Beatrice thinks and she's wrong, and you're wrong. What chance has a weak criminal like Keith with a couple of gunmen like them? He probably thinks that he's the leader and that they're working under him, but the chances are a thousand to one that they're merely hoodwinking him. Ike the Nailer and Lew the Blood! Whoever heard of two seasoned gunmen like them working under an undeveloped crook like Keith, unless for their own secret ends and all the stakes and everything else in sight? No, so long as he does precisely what they say, well and good. But the moment he attempts to stand between them and Linda, or between them and a single purpose of theirs, his life isn't worth a shoebutton. They'd take his life before he could muster up a whimper. They'd spill his blood just to maintain what they consider their own dignity. No, it's the irony of circumstance that it's become our duty now not only to save Linda from them, but Keith as well, if we want to solve the mystery of this murder. That's what happens when the weak ones in the underworld take in big criminals as partners."

I still smarted under his earlier criticism of me.

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"If they're in such danger as that, then why stay here talking?"

"Are you game enough to join me against this pair of gunmen?" Trask turned sharply on Longstreet.

"Yes."

"And you?" He turned toward me.

"I am."

"Well, you'll only take part by giving me your word to obey my orders implicitly." Trask turned away from me brusquely. He was a different man.

"All right." I winced. "Don't rub it in."

"Then it's only a question of arming ourselves and going back into that house. And the sooner, the better."

"How are we to get in, over the rope again?" I pretended to be jocular.

"No. I'll arrange about our getting in when the time comes. That isn't what is worrying me. But, Lord, I wish I knew what was in that note to Miss Beatrice! It might make all the difference in the world to our plans." Trask stood restively looking upstairs. "I don't like to leave before I learn."

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Longstreet went over and took him by the arm. "Let me go up and ask her. Perhaps I can learn," he whispered with an assurance that made me fidget.

Trask looked at him a moment and then nodded. Longstreet hurried up the stairs. I heard him knock on the door of Beatrice's room and give his name. A moment later I heard the door being unlocked.

I wished fervently that he might fail in his enterprise. My feelings were so strong that I feared that Trask might guess them from my very silence. I left him in the hall, entered the reception room, and threw myself into a chair. But I was looking through the door of the unlighted room the moment Longstreet's feet sounded on the stairs and I saw the heavy, disappointed look on his face and rejoiced. He came slowly down the stairs, and instead of stopping by Trask at their foot seemed to intend to steal by without saying a word. But Trask stopped him.

"It's no use. The letter has been burned," Longstreet announced sourly.

"And she wouldn't tell you anything about its contents?" Trask asked.

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"Don't ask me. I prefer to say nothing more about it," snapped Longstreet.

It was evident from his anger that he and Beatrice had quarreled. I could have hugged myself.

"Too bad! Too bad!" muttered Trask.

"Well, shall we start?" demanded Longstreet, as if he wanted no one's sympathy.

"Y-es," agreed Trask reluctantly.

They moved along slowly toward the door and I kept quiet, filling with offense at their oversight of me, and wondering if they would leave without me. Longstreet's hand must have been already on the door, when I heard him cry suddenly:

"But where's Swan?"

"Oh, he'll be right along," responded Trask.

"But I almost forgot it, Miss Alster wishes to speak to him."

"Oh!" Trask seemed more hopeful. Trask called me.

They agreed to wait while I went upstairs to learn what Beatrice wanted. I was back within three minutes.

"Well?" demanded Trask.

"Miss Alster wants another thousand dollars just as soon as I can get it," I answered.

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"Another thousand! Well, they must have had Miss Linda right at hand to write that note for it." Trask's eyes gleamed and he jumped toward the door. "Come on, before they have time to move her," he cried.

XVI

IT was almost midnight when we got back to the Iron Door, and Trask compelled us to separate and patrol the further sidewalk a long time before agreeing to make any direct move on the house. But now at last we were at the bottom of the steps leading up to the front door—the three of us—and I realized with amazement that he planned an attack on the front. After the desperate character he had given the two gunmen this seemed a foolhardy proceeding. From the rooms, stair or hall they could pepper away at us at will; and, though armed, we would have small chance to defend ourselves against the hidden gunmen, and but second chance for a shot at either of them. I shuddered. I saw all three of us dropped in a bloody huddle in the front hall the moment we closed that front door behind us. It seemed so rash a method of coming upon them that I had to take a hitch in my courage to follow up those stony front steps to the grim iron doors.

Trask may have sensed my feelings, though with

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Longstreet present I cared not to mention them, for he turned with his foot on one of the steps to whisper:

"If they're looking for us, they'll hardly expect a bold attack like this from the front after our previous one from the rear. At any rate, it's our likeliest chance to get in unhurt. If the iron doors aren't bolted, and if we can only get up these steps without sounding that buzzer somewhere on them! Come on! Keep way over on the side of the steps as I do, and step in diagonally clear across the door-sill as soon as I manage to get this door open."

We followed cautiously up the side of the steps. For hours, with my heart beating like a triphammer, I waited while he noiselessly negotiated the lock with his master key; then there was the agony of a still greater suspense while, slowly, without making a warning sound, he pushed open the outer door. He took a long step over the threshold and disappeared. Longstreet followed. Suddenly a fresh fear seized me and held me motionless outside. What if the gunmen had Maxim silencers on their weapons? In the noise made by that passing taxi they might have dropped both of my companions, and I myself might step in to afford but

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a third target for their silent shots. This idea on me, I stood on that top step petrified, unable to bring myself to follow them. Not until I saw Longstreet's white face peering back questioningly at me through the door did I take the step.

There was still that dim light burning in the middle of the front hall. Trask noiselessly closed the door behind us and we stood, automatics in hand, huddled against it, waiting. It seemed ages that Trask held us here listening—waiting. I could feel the perspiration running coldly from my hand over my pistol. Then he silently led the way into the dark front room. I can't tell you with what relief I slipped from the lighted hall into the safety of that dark room, with what relief, that is, until I began to wonder if the gunmen might not be hiding in this very darkness.

After more listening and waiting, Trask drew our heads together and whispered his directions. "It will be too risky roaming over this house without knowing when we may come upon them," he stated in a tone that barely reached our ears. "We've got to draw their fire or make them appear. One of us must go back outside, sound the buzzer and then ring the bell to bring them from cover. They

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came from that closet under the stairs before. Two of us can cover that and the stairway through this door, but shall I or one of you go out to ring the bell?"

"No, we need you in here more," I heard Longstreet whisper through the dark. "Wait! I'll slip out to ring the bell."

I did not envy him his journey across that front hall, nor the necessity of opening that front door with his back to the gunmen. I made no objection to his undertaking this risk, nor did Trask. Trask first placed me where, with my automatic, I could cover the stairway through the door of the room, stationed himself where he could cover the hall and the closet under the stairs, and then whispered for Longstreet to go.

I tried to hear his footsteps across the hall and, failing, imagined them. I took him across that hall altogether too fast, for it was long afterward that a slight inrush of air told me that he had actually opened the front door. Then we waited—waited—waited.

I started so sharply that I felt Trask must have noticed it when at last that buzzer began to sound. It stopped and I held my breath. Soon another

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buzzer sounded in the hall which we covered, and simultaneously a third one in the kitchen downstairs, and I knew that Longstreet had touched the front door bell.

We waited and no alien sound came to us through the still house either from below or above. Longstreet sounded the bell again. Again. So concentrated was my attention on the hall outside that I started with horror at the unexpected intrusion between me and the lighted doorway of Trask. He stood just inside, his best ear cocked for a moment against the investing hush; then he stepped boldly out into the hall and signed for me to follow.

"Let him in," he whispered, himself assuming guard over the hall and stairway.

I admitted Longstreet and we gathered behind the shelter of Trask.

"How long do you think you were outside?" Trask demanded.

"Five or ten minutes at least."

"Then they've either flown or have no yearning to tackle us," Trask sighed. "Come on! All we can do now is to search the house." He no longer bothered to lower his voice. He led the way

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straight to the hall closet under the stairs and threw the door wide open.

"Ah, just as I thought," he exclaimed. He pointed to an iron trellis hanging against one wall of the closet and gave it a jerk. As the upright frame came away from the wall at the bottom, lateral crossbars flattened out, the iron trellis became a stepladder leading from the floor of the closet to its ceiling.

"There must be a trapdoor through the ceiling of that closet or else I don't see what use this stepladder is," I exclaimed.

"Right," responded Trask, more good-naturedly than he had spoken to me for some time, "we're on the right track at last. Come on."

We hurried up the stairs. Over this closet was another hall closet. We found with ease the trapdoor that allowed egress to the stepladder in the closet below, but no similar ladder appeared in this one, nor by poking the walls and ceiling could we discover any way of secret entrance elsewhere.

"Do you suppose those men could have slipped into the closet below when we examined this one and returned here when we searched the one down there?" I asked.

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Trask slowly shook his head. "All this wasn't put in for just jack-in-the-box work like that. If we look about, I hope we'll find some hiding place or secret exit to which this progresses." But we went over every inch of the walls and ceiling of that closet without finding any other exit except its door into the hall. We examined the walls of the rest of the hall with no better success; gradually in our obstinate search we drifted into one of the two long and separate salons that took up the remainder of the floor.

"I wonder why——" Trask began and stopped.

Trask was looking blankly at the paneled wall that separated the two salons. "You wonder what?" I asked.

"I wonder why there isn't any door opening between these two rooms," he exclaimed and darted out of the front salon into the rear one without giving us further clew to his thoughts.

We came upon him eagerly inspecting the same wall in the other room.

"Ah, I thought so," he exclaimed happily.

"What?" we both asked together.

"Haven't you noticed that this wall is four or five feet further back than the one in the other

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room?" he asked. "And no closets to explain what takes up the lost space. Listen!" He knocked lightly with his knuckles on the paneling. It gave forth a hollow sound.

"We are on the track of the place in which they hide their roulette wheels during a raid," he exclaimed. "Now let's find where the entrance to this secret room is."

He drew us out into the hall. He stationed Longstreet in the hall where the wall of the front salon abutted on the hall wall, and he placed me where the wall of the rear salon crossed to the same hall.

"See! About five feet unaccounted for," he cried, "and look where it is, directly across the hall from the closet to which the ladder runs. Unless I'm vastly mistaken, we ought to find a secret entrance to this chamber somewhere in this five feet of wall space."

We all searched earnestly, but it was Trask who finally discovered the secret door catch. It was one of the buttons in the fretwork on the paneling, low down where one would not look for it, and it operated, not by pressing upon it, but by switching it to one side, like the catch on a handbag.

Trask pressed against the panel, and suddenly it

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afforded entrance to the dark chamber beyond by means of a door five feet high by perhaps three feet wide. With murmurs of admiration he pointed out the skill with which that door had been prepared. It swung in. When closed its beveled edge fitted into the outside paneling so perfectly as not to leave even the semblance of a crack for the eye to catch or the finger to feel.

He called Linda's name into the dark passage that loomed before. Receiving no reply, we scrambled into it after him. He detailed Longstreet to find the catch that operated the door from the inside before allowing the spring to shut it. While Longstreet was engaged at this, we examined, with the aid of his electric flashlamp, the ramifications of the chamber.

It was empty. A fixed iron stepladder led to an opening in the floor above, thence another to a similar opening on the fourth floor, and on the top floor a third stepladder led from the floor of the passage to a point high on the wall between that building and the next.

"There must be a secret exit up there leading onto the roof of the next building," Trask predicted, "but we won't waste time just now proving that. The

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disappointing thing is that I hoped we had come upon the place where they hid their gambling paraphernalia when they expected a raid, but this appears to be nothing more than a way of escape. If we could find their secret storeroom, we might find Linda; if not, we would at least find the place where they hid her when we were in the house before. Well, it isn't up here anyway!" With a sigh he led the way back downstairs.

Here we found that Longstreet had discovered the inner catch that operated the door in the paneling. He allowed it to swing to, switched an inside button and then pulled open the door by means of a knob large enough for his fingers to close around.

It operated without a sound; so perfectly oiled was the entire mechanism that it closed without even a click. Longstreet seemed fascinated with it.

"But this isn't finding Linda," objected Trask. "Come on! There must be another secret room in this building where they hide their gambling paraphernalia, and she may be shut up there waiting for us to release her. The chance is small, probably they have taken her away, but come."

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Under his direction we explored the floors above, making a most careful examination of the walls in quest of any further space not accounted for. Not a cubic foot could we find.

"Not on these floors. Not on the ground floor—I looked over that before we came up—Lord, I wonder where that hiding place can be!" muttered Trask, leading the way back downstairs.

In precaution against the possible return of Keith or his companions, Trask had insisted upon our leaving no lights burning behind us and was continually warning us to move quietly. We crept downstairs after him in the dark. And he himself moved so noiselessly that we did not know where he was until we ran into him on the second floor.

He was leaning against the banister gazing at the wall which held the door to the secret passage, and evidently exerting his mind to think of some other direction for our hunt to take. I spoke to him. He did not answer. We stood waiting in silence for his guidance.

Time passed and Trask neither spoke nor moved. I began to wonder if he intended to keep us dallying there in the dark forever. I had little faith in his belief that there were other secret chambers

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in that house which we had already searched so thoroughly. I gave no credence to his hope that Linda might still be there. And I had to choke down a feeling that the gunmen might return at any minute and cut off our way of escape by the front door. The very quiet of the house—there was not so much as the comforting ticking of a clock—seemed to threaten this and other dire things. Why should he keep us lingering here while his mind worked dully over his defeat? Either Keith and his companions had borne Linda away to another and safer hiding place, or our pursuit had induced them to free her. I moved restively to make him aware of my weariness at our inaction, and bent over the banister to look down into the lower hall.

Trask paid no attention to me. I spread my elbows comfortably on the banister and stared down, my eyes not consciously taking in anything below because my mind was taken up with a wish that Trask would stop dallying and get us out on the street again where we should be safe. Once I thought I heard a sound on the basement stairs as if a cat were coming up them. It was not repeated. Later my eyes conjured up a flitting sha-

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dow in the dimly lighted hall below, only to be unable to locate it definitely. I wearied of the delusions my excitement was working upon me, and turned back.

At that very instant Trask started as if his ears had picked up a warning sound, and, after listening a moment, bent over the banister. I looked over again myself; Longstreet crowded me for room to join; all three of us were soon looking down.

The elevator cage was only a few feet below us to the left, and it was upon this fact that Trask's attention seemed to be fastened. It was one of the small elevators such as are installed in private residences, not over three feet square at the most, and its top was covered, making it impossible to see inside except where this covering matched poorly against the crossbars in the top of the cage. Trask's eyes appeared to be fixed upon this slight opening. For a moment I, too, strove to see through the slight crevice in the cover into the shadowy gloom below, then my eyes veered away and came upon something in the front of the lower hall that made my blood congeal.

Stealing through the front door so silently that

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no ear could have detected them were two rough-looking characters. I recognized them at once as the two gunmen, Ike the Nailer and Lew the Blood. They stood there, guns in hand, listening, watching, waiting. Then the smaller of the two yelled in a vicious, raucous voice that rang through the house:

"Come down out of there, you, or we'll fill you as full of holes as a sieve."

Trask pulled us both away from the banister. While the gunmen below took turns roaring out their threats, he fumbled for the catch to the secret passage, opened the door and pushed us through it. There was a sound of running feet in the hall below, the sound of the elevator being started and then as Trask jumped into the secret passage behind us, the echoing hiss and clatter of a number of shots being fired downstairs.

I reached for the door in the paneling to swing it to, but Trask jerked it from my hand, and sprang out into the hall again. He appeared to have gone mad, for he began to shout orders wildly to a number of imaginary men, and he fired shot after shot from his automatic.

XVII

LONGSTREET followed Trask through the secret door while I was yet wondering whether our leader had gone mad. Before I could lay hold of it, the door closed after him. I fumbled wildly in the dark for its inner catch, found it and sprang out after them.

In the house all was silent again, strangely, ominously silent, as if brooding a new horror. Trask was at the banister again. I saw him slowly, furtively bend over it and look down. Evidently he perceived no danger, for he bent further and further over without once drawing back. I dreaded to look on what he looked, but could not keep myself from doing it. I bent over carefully and looked into the hall below. Not a person was to be seen. I turned to Trask with astonishment. His attention seemed to be centered, not on the lower hall, but again on the elevator. This had been started and stopped several feet below our floor. I looked through the crack in its roof-covering and could see nothing. My eyes veered to the entrance on the

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lower floor and I saw that the elevator door there was wide open. If the elevator had contained someone, as Trask's attention intimated, its occupant had either joined the gunmen or the gunmen had got into the elevator cage with him and were now playing possum. I made up my mind that they were all hidden in that cage waiting in ambush for us to make our position known. We were in for it now, I felt sure, with three desperate men to get past before we could effect our escape. I shuddered and drew in my head. I reached for Trask and signed that we had better return to the safe shelter of the secret passage. He shook off my hand.

"Come on," he cried in a voice that rang through the still house. He ran down the stairs, pistol in hand, not making any attempt to be noiseless. Had the man lost all his sense, or did he believe that our only chance now lay through the display of this bravado? For a moment I stood staring after him in dismay, then I followed him and Longstreet helter skelter down the stairs.

By the time we caught up with him he was standing before the open door of the elevator, gazing into it, a pistol in one hand and his flashlamp in the other. I crowded up against Longstreet to

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look over his shoulder. The spraying rays of the torch fell on a body lying in a huddle in the centre of the elevator. Trask dropped his pistol into his pocket and with his free hand turned the victim's head toward us. The ghastly light of the torch fell on the white face of Keith, brought a dull gloss to the matted blood on his hair and face.

For a moment we all stood back, then Trask whispered something to Longstreet, and together they lifted Keith from the elevator and bore him into the room at the rear. Without hesitation, Trask deposited him on the floor and switched on the lights. Then he bent down over Keith and examined his wound.

"No fracture, unless I'm mistaken. Only stunned." Trask rose alertly as if called by affairs of much greater moment. "One of you get some water and bring him to," he ordered; "the other come with me." He hurried out into the hall.

I looked at Longstreet and Longstreet looked at me, then I hastened after Trask, not relishing being left alone. He was at the elevator door about to scramble up into the cage when I approached.

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"Here, you're a younger man than I am," he said, "climb up into that car and run it back to this floor."

I got into the cage and, following his directions about operating the lever, soon had the elevator back on a level with the ground floor. He entered it and at once began a careful examination of the grilled cage.

"What in the world are you looking for in here?" I could not help asking.

"Miss Linda," Trask replied curtly.

I laughed sarcastically. What could the thin iron grille on that side of the elevator cage have to do with the hiding of Linda?

"Do you remember," he murmured while his hands still kept busy rambling about the iron work, "that series of strange sounds we heard the first time we got in here? First there was a woman's cry, then the clank of iron being brought together, then a swish and a suction—well, what has just happened has convinced me that all these sounds came from this elevator."

"What makes you think that?"

"Why should Keith have stolen into this elevator? Why should the gunmen have opened

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fire on him the moment he started it up?"

"I don't know, unless they had quarreled over something and he thought to escape by means of the elevator."

"Suppose Keith sneaked in here to get Linda away from them and they followed suspecting him, wouldn't everything have happened just about as it did?"

"Yes, but——" I couldn't think of any better theory to propose.

"Well, that convinces me that this elevator leads in some direct way to the place where Linda is hidden. If—ah!" his prolonged sigh of satisfaction manifested that at last his fingers had discovered something. I looked over his shoulder. He had found a catch on the grating on that side of the cage. He pressed it and the entire grating loosened from the upright; he pulled and it swung with a clang against the upright at the front of the cage, leaving one whole side of the cage open to the wall of the adjoining closet.

"But we've already examined that closet thoroughly and she wasn't in it," I protested.

"Yes," Trask admitted, "but wait a minute." He lighted the lamp attached to the opposite side of

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the cage. "Now, start up slowly, and stop the moment I give you the word."

I did as he ordered. As the car ran slowly upward, he devoted his entire attention to the adjoining wall on his side. "Yes, closet here; we looked into that," he mused as we passed the second floor. "Hold on there, stop here," he called as we came to the third floor. "Look at all this walled-in space under the stairs. I don't remember finding any closet to account for this, do you?"

I shook my head. At his request, I got out into the hall and investigated. There was no closet on this floor to correspond to those on the two floors below.

"I thought not." Trask received my report with a nod of satisfaction. "Then this must be the place. Who would think of a secret closet to be entered only through the closed grating in the side of an elevator? We've found it, boy, I'll stake my reputation on it." He drew his pistol excitedly from his pocket and knocked with its butt-end against the wall on that side.

"Is that someone in there or out in the street?" I cried as I heard faint, muffled cries apparently coming from a great distance.

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"We'll soon see," he replied; "here, unhook that lamp and hold it where it will throw all its light on this wall."

I not only held the light, but joined eagerly in the search with my free hand. We examined every inch of the wall once without finding either joint or catch that would afford us entrance. We went all over it a second time with the same result. I ceased investigating. Trask stood back and looked at that impenetrable wall space with his hand to his head.

"It's useless! We'll have to get an axe," I suggested.

"Here, wait!" Trask suddenly leaped back to the wall, placed the palms of his two hands against it and pushed upward. A door the width of the entire elevator began to rise; it rose as easily as a window hung on a counterpoise. And the cries from within swelled louder in our ears. They were hysterical, yet husky, as if the girl had screamed most of her voice away unheard. And with them came another sound, a sound as of a girl beating futilely with bare hands against an iron door.

"We're coming! We're coming! Be patient," cried Trask. He stepped onto the wide ledge left

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by the raised door, which evidently was double and filled between with a sound-deadening material. I followed with the lamp. We found ourselves stopped by a sheet-iron door.

"There's a knob. There! See! On the left!" I yelled.

Trask's hand was already on it. He turned it. He tried to open the door toward us. It did not budge. He gave it an impatient shove in the other direction. The door gave. There was a cry of alarm from within, a sound of a falling body, then Trask sprang through the opening.

A moment later he had Linda back in the elevator with us, sobbing hysterically on his shoulder and supported by his arms.

"There! There! Don't cry any more. You're safe now and we won't let anybody hurt you," he calmed her.

"I—I've been shut—shut up—in—there—two or three days," Linda sobbed.

"No, my dear, only a few hours, but it must have seemed like that," comforted Trask.

"Where—where are they?" She lifted her head from his shoulder, her fear stilling her sense of outrage.

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"They've gone." Trask signed for me to start the elevator down.

"They won't come back?"

Trask laughed reassuringly. "They're not likely to."

"The horrid beasts to treat me that way when I trusted them," Linda was rapidly becoming her petulant self again; "they promised to let me go after writing my note to Beatrice and then——" she stamped her feet on the floor in a passion.

I stopped the elevator at the first floor and Trask led her, not into the room where we had left Keith, but into the front reception room, and closed the door between them; also he closed the door into the hall.

"Now, young lady," he said turning alertly on Linda, "suppose you tell us all about it."

"All about what?" Linda sank into a deep chair and assumed the important task of rearranging her hair.

"All about those horrid beasts and how you came to fall into their hands."

"Will you punish them?" Linda forgot her hair, sat up, her blue eyes sending out sparks.

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"I'll attend to them all right," Trask nodded gravely.

"Then I will. Why shouldn't I, after the way they have treated me?" Linda sank back in her seat again with a sigh. But though we waited, she said nothing more. She retreated into a sullen, moody, silence; it was evident that her vindictiveness was about as enduring and as much to be counted on as her other fickle feelings.

"Well?" demanded Trask at last.

"I'm so tired and hungry and miserable. Please don't ask me to tell you anything about this now," she requested with a smile meant to cajole Trask from his purpose.

But Trask gave way not an inch before her. "Do you want them to get you into their hands again?"

"Oh, no, no, no!"

"They may unless you tell me everything so that I can protect you from them."

Linda put her hands to her eyes, threatening to weep.

Trask's voice became impatient. "You've already got yourself into one dangerous situation through your silly silence. You'll get into another from which we may not be able to extricate you so easily,

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if you persist. Miss Alster, just so long as you allow Keith to go about claiming to be your brother——”

“My brother!” Linda jumped to her feet. “Then he told you, too? The mean thing! I’ll never forgive him for that.” Linda began to walk angrily up and down the room. “I’ll never, never forgive him for that,” she kept murmuring to herself.

“I’d rather learn all about it from you than from him,” Trask pressed her.

“I’ll tell. Yes, I’m going to tell.” Linda stopped and faced Trask. “Listen! My aunt hired him to serve as our butler. He was the newest one of her protégés and she talked of no one but him until we were sick of the sound of his name. At first he was a good servant, paid no attention to me, minded his own business. Then, as soon as he had made sure of his place with her, he began to devote himself to me. I didn’t fancy it that a butler should always be volunteering to go out and mail my letters or run upstairs half a dozen times a day for things I had forgotten. One of the maids could have attended to those things, but he was always at hand offering his services and I didn’t like to offend him by refusing.

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"After a time he got to stopping me in the hall and on the stairs when no one else was around, and saying he had something he wanted to tell me. I thought he had merely developed a crush on me, so I always just laughed and got away. This kept on for some time and finally one night when I was alone in the house, he came to my room, closed the door, and told me that he was my brother. He said that he hadn't told anyone and didn't intend to, but had merely taken this method of getting near to have a talk with me. At first, I didn't believe it. It didn't seem possible. But he had names and dates and facts and I—well, what could I do? I didn't know a thing about myself except that once, when my aunt was in a rage against me, she said she had adopted me and that I might have been a shopgirl or on the streets if she hadn't taken pity on me.

"I was at my wit's end. I didn't know what to do. My aunt and I didn't get along well, she was always finding fault with me. I felt that, if she found out that this butler was my brother, she might disinherit me entirely or—well, I knew her, she wouldn't have hesitated to turn me out of the house. So I made him promise not to tell a soul

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and I let things drift. Then my aunt began to notice the way he was devoting himself to me. She came out of her room one time, caught us talking in whispers on the stairs, called me into her room, and accused me of carrying on a flirtation with him. After that he used to make a sign when he wanted to talk with me and I went to my room and waited for him to come there.

“My aunt caught him at this, came to my room, and surprised us talking together. Of course I couldn't say anything except to make some silly trumped-up excuse for his being there that was worse than none at all. She gave him his notice, sent him out of the room, and then gave me the most terrible talking to I had ever had in my life. She accused me of being a low creature that no amount of work on her part could raise to a higher level. I could see if she ever learned that Keith was my brother, it would simply end everything with her for me. So I slipped a note under Keith's door begging him not to notice me any more and not to tell anyone.

“The next day I received a note from him saying he wouldn't tell my aunt or anyone of our relationship, but that he must have one long talk with

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me before he left. He would wait until some evening when my aunt was out and it would be safe. Then came that evening when my aunt went to the opera with Mr. Swan. Keith came to my room. He said he was perfectly willing to sacrifice himself for my sake, but that when I came into her money he ought to have a share in it for keeping silent. I agreed; I agreed to everything he asked, only trying to get him out of my room before Beatrice noticed he was there or my aunt returned. And then, just as he was about to go, I heard someone running upstairs and——”

“Someone?” interrupted Trask.

“Yes, someone, and then——”

“One minute.” Trask held up a hand. “Did you hear one or two persons running up those stairs?”

“Two. First there was Beatrice, and then my aunt. And as soon as——”

“Wait a minute!” Trask refused to let her go on. “You heard someone on the stairs; you had Keith hide in your room; then what did you do?”

“Why! I just waited, I guess.”

“You opened the door to see who it was, didn’t you?”

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"Who told you I did that? Has Beatrice——"

"One minute! Let us get this straightened out first. You opened that door, didn't you?"

"Well—y-es."

"And you looked out and saw two people and then your aunt, didn't you?"

"Two people including my aunt."

Trask fixed her with a look. "You might as well tell a story that agrees with the other ones," he said slowly. "If you falsify about one point, how can you expect us to believe any of the rest? Now——"

"Has Beatrice——"

"Miss Linda," interrupted Trask hotly, "who was the man you saw in that upper hall with Miss Beatrice before your aunt came up?"

"I shan't tell you."

"Very well." Trask pretended to be disappointed, but I could detect the hindered smile of satisfaction over her unintentional admission that some one had been there. In a moment it was gone and his manner was persuasive again. "Very well, you closed your door before your aunt came upstairs, didn't you?"

"Yes, I——"

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"Did you listen to the quarrel with Miss Beatrice she had out there in the hall?"

"I don't know that I should call it a quarrel."

"How long did it last?"

"Perhaps five minutes."

"What was it about?"

"Why do you ask me that? If Beatrice——"

"Well, never mind about that. What happened after that?"

"My aunt went downstairs. I opened my door and saw Beatrice standing out in the hall in front of her door. She didn't see me, so I closed mine softly. Keith had hidden under my bed. I went to him and told him he must leave the house that very night. I promised that if he would do that, and not tell anyone about our relationship, I would do anything he asked. And then after a time my door opened and Beatrice came in."

"Did she see Keith?"

"I—I'm not going to tell."

"Very well, what then?"

"Beatrice and I went out in the hall, looked over the banister and saw the light showing in the hall below from aunt's room. Then——" Linda appeared obviously to be jumping a gap—"then, I

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went back into my room and, as soon as her door was closed, Keith left the house."

"Who closed your aunt's door?"

Linda's thin lips closed tightly; she merely shook her head.

"Do you mean you don't know or that you won't tell?"

Linda turned away without a word.

"Was it Keith or you?"

"Oh, it wasn't either of us." Linda's denial was too prompt to be dissembled.

"Was Keith the first one to leave the house after your aunt's door was closed?"

"Why, yes—of course."

"Can you swear that he left the house?"

"I watched over the banister until he got all the way down and out."

"And you are sure this was after your aunt's door was closed?"

"Why yes, of course."

Trask turned away as if he had learned all he needed, then suddenly he turned back to her again.

"Miss Linda," he inquired quickly, "who told Miss Beatrice that Keith was your brother, you or Keith?"

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"Did he tell her that!" Linda looked at Trask as if she could not believe it, then after a moment she turned away with her first sob.

"Yes, and now if you'll stay right in this room and listen you'll see what that little sneak gets for playing double with everyone concerned." Trask walked angrily to the door into the hall, flung it open and went out. After a moment I followed him.

XVIII

KEITH had evidently regained consciousness. We heard him whimpering to Longstreet even before we entered the other door.

"He wants to go," explained Longstreet.

Trask stood over the wounded, abject creature lying on the floor. "So you want to go, do you?" he demanded.

"Yes, sir."

"Nothing to attend to first here in the house before you take leave?"

"No, sir. I—I want to go and have my head fixed up." He put one hand on the wound which Longstreet had rudely bound up with a handkerchief.

"Keith," Trask's voice grew angry, "where is Miss Linda?"

"Miss Linda?" Keith pretended not to understand why this question should be addressed to him.

"Yes, where have you hidden her?"

"Hidden her?"

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"Do you mean to tell me that you'd go out of this house and leave her to starve to death where you've hidden her away from us?"

"I didn't hide her, I give you my word for it, I didn't hide her," whimpered Keith, his voice breaking a little before the stern tone and manner with which Trask bore down on him.

"Get up out of there!" Trask was domineering, bullying, quite a different man from the mild, good-natured, almost kindly being I had considered him. But the effect was immediate.

Keith scrambled nervously from the floor to his feet.

"A fine piece of work you are!" Trask's tone was scathing.

Keith cringed. "You ain't got no right nor call to treat me this way," he muttered.

"I haven't? If I gave you what you ought to get, I'd beat you to a jelly and leave you for the coroner. Come, what have you got to say for yourself?"

"I ain't got nothing to say. What would I have to say?" Keith tried to brave Trask's eyes, failed, his eyes dropped, and sneaked furtively about the floor of the room. "I ain't got nothing to say. I

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don't know what you mean," he mumbled submissively.

"Well, I've got something to say to you." Trask moved away from his position between Keith and the door. But he had evidently foreseen the effect of this move, for he stepped back in time to frustrate Keith's dive for freedom. He held him easily with one arm, then threw him back into the nearest chair.

"There! You sit there until I finish with you," he ordered.

"You can't hold me. I haven't done anything that you can hold me for," protested Keith, breathing hard.

"I've got plenty to hold you for, if I wanted to," answered Trask, "but what use such a weak, sniveling sneak as you would be to us, I don't see. However, you just sit there until I've had my say with you."

"You can't pull me for anything. I haven't done a thing that you can send me down for. I'm glad you know enough to see that." Keith seemed to perk up a lot at the news that he was not to be held.

Trask silenced him with a look. With a gesture

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he waved that whole subject aside. "Keith," he said, "you claim to be Miss Linda's brother, don't you?"

"Yes, and what if I do?"

"Nothing, only you're not."

"I—I—I'd like to know what you know about that. Don't you suppose I know my own sister? Pretty soon you'll be telling me ——"

"I'm telling you now." Trask heedlessly interrupted his whimpering protest. "Listen! You base your claim to being her brother on the fact that your father and mother were begging letter writers here by the name of Taylor. So far, so good. They were driven out of New York by the police and you were taken away from them and put into a foundling asylum. Four years later they returned here to play the same game. This time they kept with them a two-year-old baby that they exhibited to people who descended on them to investigate their requests for alms. This child also was taken away from them and later adopted by Miss Alster. It's on this ground, isn't it, that you claim that Linda Alster is your sister?"

"We can't help our parents. We don't choose 'em. But I'd like to know what better proof I

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need to show that Linda is my sister." Keith sat up, facing Trask with a confident grin.

"Is that all you've got to prove your relationship?"

"I'd like to know what more I need."

"Have you consulted your parents about it?"

"No. What's the need of that?"

"Well, you take my advice and go and ask them about it."

"Ask them about it! Why?" Keith seemed puzzled.

"Because she's no more your sister than the Empress of Russia is."

"Oh, come off. Don't try to put one over on me like that. Do I have to ask my mother if my sister's my sister?"

"Yes, you do when your mother is a begging letter writer."

"See here now!" Keith rose to his feet. "You can insult me, but you can't——"

"Sit down, close your trap and listen to what I've got to say to you." Trask pushed him summarily back into his chair. "You know enough about begging letter writers, don't you, to understand that the babies that they show to people prying into their

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affairs are frequently not their own children at all? Oh, very well, you don't need to admit it. It's a well known fact that these babies are borrowed or rented or adopted from other families living in the tenements. I know what I'm talking about. I'm casting no aspersions on your parentage, understand that. The reports I have looked up show clearly that you are the son of the Taylors. But other reports show quite as clearly and indubitably that Miss Linda Alster is not."

"Wha—what do you mean?" Keith was staring at Trask with his mouth agape and his face growing whiter and whiter.

"I mean that your little blackmail game is all over, can never be worked again. I mean that while your parents were in Cleveland after being driven out of New York they secured under false pretenses a baby belonging to a widow living in the same tenement and, before this woman died, they ran away with it. They stole this child. It wasn't theirs. And that child was Linda Alster. As I told you in the beginning, she is not your sister. She is no relation to you whatever."

"Have—have you told her?" Keith got out the question with difficulty.

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"Yes, she is in the other room listening to every word that passes between us."

Keith moistened his lips. He forced a laugh. "Hell, all this is easy enough for you to say," he managed at last to mutter tauntingly.

"Yes, and I haven't many more words I want to say to you. Get up, Mr. Keith, Taylor, or whatever your real name is; you're about as petty and sneaking a blackmailer as I've ever been able to keep my hands off of. If I ever hear of your trying this game on her again, you won't get off so easy."

Keith mumbled something.

"How much of that first thousand dollars did Lew the Blood allow to stick to your hands?"

"They took——" Keith's grievance made him almost forget himself.

"Every cent?" Trask gave him no time to think.

"Well, y-es, but——"

"But you thought to outwit them by taking away Miss Linda when they weren't around. And see what the result of that was. If it hadn't been for us, they'd have croaked you, left you in the elevator with a shot in your hide for the county to bury.

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That's what you can expect attempting to use guns like them for your own sneaking ends. What did they send for Miss Beatrice for?"

"I don't know. They made me get Linda to write to her. They made me——"

"I don't suppose it ever dawned on you that they meant to compromise with her for a lump sum and then hand you over to the police? No, I can see it didn't. But you know it now and perhaps you've learned better than to go near them again. And now, git!"

Keith mumbled something.

Trask made a wipe at him with one of his arms. "Git!"

Keith dodged and sneaked away through the door without so much as another word or look. We all waited in silence until we heard the outer door close behind him.

"That's the last any of us is likely to hear of Mr. Keith," announced Trask, "and incidentally, in disposing of his case, I have doubtless completed the commission which the late Miss Cornelia Alster intended for me." His voice changed to his ordinary good-natured tone. "By the way, do you men realize what time it is?" He pulled out his watch.

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"Two o'clock! Time we were getting Miss Linda away." He closed the door for a moment. "I thought it was better that you should know these facts in order that Miss Linda might be assured of protection in the future when I might not be aware she needed it," he informed us, "but I must ask you to promise me not to let this news about her spread any further."

We promised and followed him out into the hall. And from then on we every one of us found a new Trask to reckon with. It was as if, gradually feeling his way, he had at last established enough data to shape his own course and this rendered him heedless of any of our wishes. All his earlier complaisance vanished; in its place appeared a determination to handle matters in his own way, not to be frustrated. During the rest of that night he moved us about like pawns, utterly disregarding our desires, disdaining even to argue them, compelling us to stand, sit, and move where best suited his ends with a quiet mastery not to be gainsaid.

It was Linda who first attempted to run contrary to his wishes. I had returned to the Iron Door with the taxi which Trask had requested me to secure. We had all entered except Trask, and we all heard

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with surprise his order to the chauffeur to drive to the Martha Washington Hotel.

"But I don't want to go there. I want to go home," expostulated Linda.

"There are reasons why I want you to stay there to-night," replied Trask quietly, getting into the fourth seat and closing the door behind him with a slow caution that was in itself indicative.

"But——" Linda started to rise impetuously from her seat.

"You are going to the Martha Washington," Trask said in a voice of steel.

Linda fell back in her seat with a gasp. She looked at Trask with astonishment and Trask looked at her. I waited for that outbreak of temperament customary when her wishes were crossed; I waited with a sort of huge, smothered joy, but it failed to come. Something in Trask's look must have quelled it, for Linda got out at the hotel, meek as a lamb, and accompanied Trask inside.

He was gone a long time, but returned without any apologies and ordered the chauffeur to drive us to the Alster house on Seventy-eighth Street. Of course, our strained relations had deposited Longstreet and me in a sullen silence during Trask's

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absence. Longstreet probably felt as uncomfortable at our being left alone together as I did, and Trask, once back in the cab, also withdrew to his own thoughts with an absorption hardly calculated to put us any more at our ease. The taxi had barely turned into Fifth Avenue on its way north before I concluded I would much prefer to stay in my own rooms downtown that night rather than to continue on with them.

"I think, if you don't mind," I suggested, "you can drop me at Thirty-fourth Street and I'll sleep in my own rooms to-night."

Trask merely looked at me and shook his head. I don't know what it was. It was something in his look. I said nothing more about what I wanted or didn't want to do. I allowed myself to be carried uptown with him.

But if my wishes were ruthlessly overridden, I at least had the satisfaction of seeing Longstreet's meet a similar fate. As we were about to turn into Seventy-eighth Street, Longstreet bent forward, knocked on the window and signed for the chauffeur to stop.

"What do you want?" demanded Trask.

"I'll get out here and walk along home," he re-

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plied. "I hardly care to call on Miss Alster at this ghastly hour in the morning." He smiled, but I felt he did so to cover up his real objection. He did not care to meet Beatrice so soon after having quarreled with her.

"No. Better stay. We need you," Trask said, waving for the chauffeur to keep on. "You needn't worry. I telephoned her we were coming," he had the grace to add just before the taxi drew up in front of the house.

For all our supposed superiority of social position over this mere detective, we might as well have been prisoners in his custody.

As Trask with his key let us into the house, Beatrice came from the reception room to meet us. There were dark circles about her eyes; she had undoubtedly been crying—over her difference with Longstreet, I imagined—but the quick look that she gave him showed no signs of yielding.

"But—but where is Linda?" she asked.

Trask explained. "I asked her to remain at that hotel overnight. It was necessary for us to have a few words with you quite alone," he added.

She seemed a little surprised, but whether at his action or his tone, I could not make out, for she

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at once led the way into the reception room, and Trask drove us both into it ahead of him.

"Miss Alster," he began at once, "your silence on one matter placed Miss Linda in a dangerous situation from which we fortunately were just in time to save her. I don't say this in the way of reproach. I state it as a fact that it would be well for you to bear in mind. That is all past, done for, and attended to. But we now face another situation quite as dangerous for one or two other people, and the time has come for me to tell you so frankly, even brutally."

He paused and looked at her as if hoping that she would show some signs of weakening. She showed none. She merely stood there regarding him gravely, her great dark eyes mourning, yet unquestioning, unyielding.

"Miss Alster," he went on after a minute, "the time has arrived when I must ask you certain questions regarding what happened in this house on the night of your aunt's death. Will you or won't you answer them?"

"I have already told you all I can."

"Wait. Don't say that." Trask took a step toward her. She did not move. "Listen! There

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were four people in this house that night who had an opportunity to commit that crime. Miss Linda has told me her story. Two have——”

“Linda has told you!”

Was I mistaken? Beatrice seemed relieved rather than alarmed.

Trask went back. “Two have been relieved of all suspicion, but this only makes things that much the worse for the other two.”

“Two?” Beatrice stared at him with wonder.

“Yes, two. You don’t suppose that you alone can pay the penalty for your obstinate silence, do you? No. It places another vastly more under suspicion. He was present before the return of your aunt. He stole out of this house soon after she was murdered. He——”

“Ah! Keith!”

“No. Someone else whom you would be much more likely to protect; someone else whom you would have the strongest motive for protecting.”

She looked from him to each of us as if unwilling to decide whom he meant. “Who?” she asked finally.

“Longstreet!” Trask threw the name at her like a bomb.

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"Allan? Oh!" She looked at Trask with horror, with astonishment, one hand going to her heart, the other reaching on the vain air behind her for support. For a moment she stared at him speechlessly; she seemed unable to get a word from her surprise; then her words came fast; there was passion, misery, suffering in them.

"Oh, no, no, no, don't tell me that! Don't tell me that you suspect him of anything just because I—just because I—just because——"

"That'll be about enough of this little game, Mr. Trask."

Longstreet moved in between them.

Trask whipped around on him as if this were the very thing for which he had waited. "Game!" he sneered. "I guess you'll find this is something more than a game. Where were you on the night of February 5 between 8:30 and 9:20?"

"I have already told you more than once that if you wanted to know you must find out for yourself." Longstreet's tone was icy.

"Yes, and I've found out, and it doesn't look particularly well for you, young man."

"I shall be glad to hear about all that a little later—when we are alone." Longstreet crossed

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over to Beatrice and attempted to get her to leave the room. She shook her head.

"That's right! It would be much better for you to stay and hear the evidence against him," exclaimed Trask. "Shall I go on?" he asked after a moment.

Beatrice nodded. Longstreet ceased to persuade her. He sighed deeply and turned facing Trask.

Trask squared round toward him. "This is the evidence against you," he stated. "On the night of the murder, Agnes, the maid, heard one man in the room above this when she went upstairs to her room at about 8:30. She heard the voice of another man in Miss Linda's room. The last mentioned man was Keith. That has been settled. And in settling that we have proved that it could not have been Keith who was in the library with Miss Beatrice. Who was it then? There was someone there, for I found a transfer in the room so punched as to prove conclusively that someone else was there. Who? Who but you? You left your house on the night of the murder at 8:10. Instead of telephoning from your own house, you went over on Madison Avenue and telephoned from a pay station. You seemed greatly excited when you came out of the booth after your

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short conversation. You got on a Madison Avenue car bound in this direction. It is true, no one saw you enter this house on the night of the murder, but you dropped an unused transfer which I have in my possession, and you were seen to leave this house at 9:20, immediately after the murder. It's of no use for you to dispute these facts, they can be proved. It's no use for you to be silent and to keep Miss Beatrice silent; you were here, you had the opportunity, there are too many facts against you, too many witnesses, too many——"

Trask stopped at the sob and sudden fling toward him of Beatrice. "I'll tell—I'll tell you everything," she cried.

XIX

BEATRICE moved back and sank into a deep chair facing Trask. She gave not a look either to me or to Longstreet. It was as if we were not there. She gazed steadily at Trask for a moment as if hoping he would relent, then she folded her hands in her lap and began.

"It will be necessary to tell you something about my aunt so that you may understand," she started in a voice so calm, so quiet and so detached that, although her gaze was directed steadily at Trask, it was more as if she were talking to herself. "Aunt Cornelia was a strange woman, one of quick, warm, generous impulses, who seemed to make many friends, but only to quarrel with them. It wasn't their fault. It wasn't her fault. She couldn't help it. There was some queer twist in her nature, something almost as strong and baffling as mania, that seemed to drive her into doing absurdly kind and generous acts and then to force her to regret them. She struggled against this; she suffered the deepest remorse, I am sure, every time she had a differ-

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ence with anyone; yet she kept right on having these differences until she had driven everyone away from her except Linda and me.

"I want you to know that I loved her, loved her very dearly." Beatrice paused as if perhaps to reassure herself on that point. "Sometimes I believed that I was the only one who did understand her, the only one who understood that she could not help quarreling with the ones for whom she cared most. And yet, and yet I myself had one of the most violent quarrels with her." She sighed. "But of that later. Something else comes first, only do remember that I loved her. I wouldn't like you, no, nor her, to hear me say what I'm going to say about her without realizing that I loved her.

"Aunt Cornelia was so fond of us that she was always becoming jealous. She couldn't endure having either of us show the slightest, the most passing interest in anyone else; she couldn't endure having anyone else show the slightest, the most passing interest in us. That made it difficult for us two girls as children; that made it even worse when we grew up. She seemed to sense immediately when any man became in the least interested in us, and she stopped at nothing to put an end to it. I

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had no trouble on this score until—until lately; but Linda was pretty, men liked to talk to her, to call on her, to take her to the theater, to the opera, to dances.

“Poor Linda! You must bear this in mind. It explains why she feels as she does. Man after man that invited her to places had his invitation declined, not by Linda but by her aunt. Man after man that came to call on her was literally chilled and frozen out of the house by Aunt Cornelia. And when this wasn’t enough, when Harold Avery kept on in spite of everything she did, she even kept Linda locked in her room until she promised not to have anything to do with him.”

Harold Avery! So there had been a real love affair between Linda and Harold Avery! Trask merely nodded, but I looked at Beatrice incredulously.

“I was very sorry for Linda. There was much to be said on her side. I knew that she kept up a clandestine correspondence with Mr. Avery, that she managed to see him once in a great while, but always secretly so that auntie wouldn’t carry out her threat to disinherit her and put her out of the house. Linda had been brought up with the assur-

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ance that she would inherit this entire estate. It wasn't long before I learned that auntie was threatening to leave everything to me. What I did about this seemed only fair. I had a talk with Linda and promised her that, if this ever happened, I would deed back half of it to her.

"I couldn't blame Linda very much for meeting and writing to Mr. Avery after I realized that she really cared for him. I blamed her even less later when I got into trouble of the same sort. I met someone I liked, yes, someone I liked very much——"

Beatrice's voice had become very soft and low and now she looked on the floor at her feet instead of at Trask. I glanced at Longstreet. His eyes, too, were on the floor. A hot wave of jealousy broke over me, passed on, and left me feeling like ice. I wanted to spring up and cry out. I couldn't. It was as if all my senses suddenly became blunted, inoperative. I knew that Beatrice was going on. I wanted to hear every word she said. I had to exert all my force to hear, not to miss more:

"Naturally, in the course of time he came to call on me. Aunt Cornelia sat in the same room with us, just as she had with Linda. She never left us,

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she never said a word to either of us all the time he was here, and she pretended not to hear when we tried to include her in the conversation; I was astonished when he called again and—and a little ashamed—but soon I was furious, for at the end of this call, my aunt told him coolly that she didn't want him to call again. He came. It never occurred to him to attempt to meet me clandestinely, and I liked him all the better for that. This time my aunt said nothing to him, but afterward she told me she had written to his father forbidding him to have anything more to do with me. I upbraided her for doing anything so undignified. She threatened to disinherit me. I went up and packed my trunks. She became nearly frantic. I stayed to keep her from going mad.

“He called again. The following morning my aunt put on her bonnet, went out, and was gone nearly all day. It wasn't until long afterward that I learned what she had done—all of it.” Beatrice flushed. It was some time before she went on.

“The father of the man who had called on me was one of the biggest and busiest of the bankers downtown in this city. My aunt went to his office and sent in her card. He remembered her letter

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and refused to see her. She waited in his outer office from ten in the morning until four in the afternoon without leaving it for a moment; but he managed to avoid seeing her. Then she forced her way by the clerks, had a frantic scene with him in his own office that all but got into the newspapers, and refused to leave, until he lost his temper and swore that, if his son didn't immediately break off relations with a family such as hers, he would disown him.

"My aunt came back, smiling, happy, and told me what she had done. I went out and met Allan clandestinely. He had just left his home for good after a frightful scene with his father. He was for never going back, but I knew he was on the verge of perfecting an invention which would make him independent, and I compelled him to return. I did it by promising—no, it doesn't matter what I promised." Her great dark, soft eyes left the floor, seemed just to kiss Longstreet. It was as if a hot rake had been drawn over my heart. I looked toward the door. If I could have moved, I would have gone then.

"Go on!" It was the first time Trask had spoken.

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"We had agreed not to write, not to attempt to see each other unless something happened that really made it necessary. I know this must have been quite as hard for you as it was for me."

Again her eyes kissed Longstreet. I knew by the pause, by instinct, without looking at them, with my eyes turned away toward the door. Again my feelings murmured so that I lost some of her words.

"—— night of the murder, Allan Longstreet telephoned me. His invention was so nearly perfected that he couldn't wait any longer, he must see me. I implored him not to come, to wait. He came. It seemed like a stroke of Providence that my aunt had already left for the opera, but I knew she had become suspicious, not of me, but of poor Linda, and I feared she would return and surprise us. So I let him in myself and took him upstairs to the library, and my ears were on the alert. I heard Agnes coming upstairs and I made him stop talking. I didn't want to have to pledge anyone else in the house to secrecy. We talked and I saw that his invention was truly on the verge of being perfected. Not quite. It seemed to me a time when he must not be distracted or worried, and I feared

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my aunt might return, find him here, and cause a final break between him and his father.

"I thought I heard my aunt's voice outside on the street. I told Allan what he must do if it proved to be she. I heard the front door open. We ran upstairs. I pushed him into my room, I closed the door. I stood in the hall outside determined that my aunt should not learn he was there. She came up and accused me of having been talking with Keith in the library. She—well, after a time she went down to her room. I went into Linda's room and discovered Keith there. In my excitement I had forgotten to knock. We agreed that Keith must leave the house at once. He was her brother, but I realized that this was no time for her to tell auntie that.

"I crept downstairs without making a sound. The door of my aunt's room was half open and the light streamed through it into the darkened hall. I looked in and saw her sitting in a chair with her back toward the door apparently asleep, but there was a mirror on the wall in which she could see anyone who tried to pass in the hall. I pulled the door to, but it couldn't be closed on account of some obstruction on the sill. I picked this up, found it

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was the key, and closed the door without making a sound. Then I wondered how auntie could have fallen asleep so quickly, and in a chair. I got to thinking that she must be pretending she was asleep in order to surprise anyone who attempted to come downstairs to leave the house. So I locked the door.

"I went upstairs and we got Keith out of the house safely. Then I went into my room and explained to Allan. He did everything just as I asked him to. I watched him down both flights and out of the front door, and then went back to my room and to bed. That's all that happened in this house that night. Mr. Longstreet wasn't away from me for a moment except while he was in my room, and I watched him leave the house. You believe me, don't you, Mr. Trask?" Beatrice bent toward him eagerly.

"Yes." Trask's response was quick, emphatic. "But what about the key to your aunt's room?"

"I dropped it into the pocket in my dress. In the excitement I never thought of it, it slipped completely from my mind, until after the locksmith had opened the door the next morning. Then I realized that if I had to explain how I came by it, every-

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thing would have to be told and Allan would be drawn into the trouble and it might—it might——” she stopped.

“It might what?” asked Trask softly.

“I was afraid it might make worse trouble with his father, so I slipped the key back into the lock. Nobody saw me. Then Linda’s cry told me something awful had happened. I—I—you know the rest.” Beatrice’s voice broke down.

Longstreet rose to his feet. I rose too. I wondered if I could slip out of that door unnoticed. This was no place for me. Every torturing second was proving that more and more to me.

“Your aunt appeared to be asleep in her chair—quite the same in every particular as she seemed when discovered the next morning?” I heard Trask ask her.

“Yes. Yes. I——” Beatrice failed to continue.

“And Mr. Longstreet consented to this silence merely to protect himself?”

“No, no! Oh, no, not that!” Beatrice rose and stood, trembling, before Trask. “I—I had to deceive him. I had to make him think his silence was necessary in order to protect little Linda. I

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had to deceive Linda until I could see she suspected me of knowing something about auntie's death. I had to deceive everybody—to tell lies—to act as if I did know the murderer of my poor aunt. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't see how I should ever be able to explain things to—to Allan. I couldn't trust anyone. I couldn't see how anyone could trust or care for me any longer. I—Allan, you forgive me?" Her voice choked. She turned imploringly toward Longstreet.

He went to her and took her in his arms. I heard her sob; I heard him murmuring soft, comforting words. I could stand it no longer. I left them. I left the house. My head low, my feet lagging, muttering useless words of comfort to myself, I tramped through the deserted streets to my former abode. I had lost her.

XX

MISS WALSH seemed startled when she found me at the office ahead of her the next morning. I blessed her for passing on to her desk without remark. I thanked her from the bottom of my soul for not compelling me to try my voice. I had spent a night of consuming self-pity, my voice—I wasn't sure of it.

My fingers twitched as I moved the morning mail aimlessly to and fro about my desk. I felt the necessity of appearing busy with her eyes upon me, though, whenever I looked, she seemed considerably to be keeping them off me. In a few minutes I knew I must call her for the morning dictation. I nerved myself for it. I tried my voice in an undertone once or twice before I trusted it.

And yet it must have revealed to her my wretched, broken condition, for she rose so impetuously that her chair toppled over and she came hurrying to me without delaying to right it. But oh, her discernment and consideration! She did not ask me a

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question. She stood looking at me a moment and then sat down quietly beside me.

I had protected myself against any questions or at least I thought I had. My head was lowered over the only letter in that morning's mail I had bethought me to open. Long afterward, she told me that I was poring over a letter that was upside down. I did not know it. Not that morning.

I began to dictate. I made a mistake in the name and I observed that she corrected it without word to me. By sheer brute force of will, I managed to dictate a sentence or two. Then I began to ask her to read back to me from her notes. I must have requested this oftener than I realized.

"I know, I think, what you wish said to him," she suggested gently.

"What?" My voice seemed to be all right when I was cross.

"You will agree to renew his lease on the same terms, provided he'll assume the expense of all except extraordinary repairs," she stated, and then added as an afterthought, "same as you did with Judson."

"Y-es, that will do," I grudged and then availed myself of the excuse she supplied, "same as I did

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with Judson, just as you say, we must treat all tenants alike." I pushed the letter along my desk toward her.

"Shall I wait until this afternoon for the rest of the letters?" she asked immediately.

"No. Why?" I demanded gruffly.

"I—well, I have some of yesterday's mail left."

"Ah, it doesn't do for me to be away from the office so much, I see," I exclaimed, relieved.

"No."

Something about the way she said it simply broke down my guard. "I won't be—much—after this!" I promised bitterly.

She gasped.

I turned and made sure I had heard aright. Her thin, pretty, young face wore a look of surprise and her eyes escaped mine. She rose. She sat down again beside me rigidly. "To whom did you say the next letter was?" she demanded nervously and she fumbled in her hair for the pencil she had dropped on the floor.

I picked up her pencil and handed it to her. Somehow her agitation had the effect of quieting mine. My eyes lingered on her. I saw how alluring she was with her dark hair and blue eyes and

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with her pale face just washed with the high colors of the rose.

"Why did you really want to put off taking the rest of these letters, Mary?" I asked and my voice had come back.

"I—I don't know." She looked to assure herself of the change in me. "You—you didn't seem quite yourself," she said.

"I'm not." I sighed. "I've been through a lot. I've been a fool," I cried, "but—but I'm not going to be anybody's fool any longer."

"Oh, I'm so glad! I saw——" that was all she said.

"What did you see, Mary?" I asked her gently.

"I saw how earnest you were, I saw how——" she stopped until my eyes begged her to go on. "I saw how you were being used and how mistaken you were, and it made me wild, it made me furious at the way you were being misled, at the way all you did was taken for granted. Why! I don't know another man in New York that—that——" She stopped and rose, breathless with resentment.

My own anger taken up by another! How it soothed! "Yes," I murmured and fell into pleasant dreams.

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"You looked so wretched when I came in this morning. You need a long, long rest or you'll break down. You must go away and let me take care of things," she mused, her anger all gone now.

"Yes, Mary." I rose and stood beside her.

"Will you?" she asked softly without moving away from me.

"Yes, Mary." I let my hand fall on hers, maneuvered it into mine, caressing it with the other. "Yes, Mary," I repeated, wishing she would turn toward me and no longer look away with that strange, tense look on her young face.

I put an arm around her waist without giving up her hand and then she turned, a look on her face such as I had never seen in any woman's before, a look of hope still clinging to a little doubt, a look of uncertainty so delicious that she hesitated to make sure.

I drew her to me and our lips met. Mary Walsh, whom I had always thought so sarcastic, so cold, so hard-hearted!

"There must be one more foolish answer," I declared.

She laughed. "Ask your foolish question first," she retorted.

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I don't know how long afterward it was when the door opened and Trask appeared. I expected him, but it was Mary's quick ear that detected his coming and forestalled our being caught. Mary withdrew to her desk at once and Trask sank into the chair she had occupied before we had come to our wonderful understanding.

After a moment, he began to laugh. "I've just come from the Martha Washington," he announced.

"Yes?" I was eager to complete my necessary business with him so as to be alone with Mary again.

"The little minx! Whom do you suppose Miss Linda had there to breakfast with her?" Trask demanded with humor.

"I haven't the least idea."

"Harold Avery. It was a sort of betrothal breakfast. They had fixed everything up, were having one of those smooth, June antemarital arguments as to whether the ceremony should be performed in church or—Lord, but you look all in, Swan!"

"You're the second one to tell me that this morning," I grumbled.

"Yes, I noticed that your stenographer seemed

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rather more than passingly interested in you," he retorted in a voice lowered so as not to carry across the office to her.

How had he observed it so quickly? His swift insight made me uncomfortable. "Well, I suppose you're about through now with the Alster case," I veered to change the subject.

"Y-es, I think so."

"With Beatrice, Linda, Keith and Longstreet all cleared from suspicion, I fancied you must be nearly ready to give it up. And if not——"

"If not—well, what? Go on," he ordered.

"If not—well, as executor of the estate and paymaster, I felt it was about time to lodge a protest against continuing the investigation much longer. It seems to me like a wasteful and unnecessary expense, doesn't it appear so to you?"

He answered with a question: "When does your stenographer go to luncheon?"

"At noon, one, or half past, any time—why?"

"Why not send her now?" At my amazed, inquiring look, he added, "Then we can talk the entire matter over by ourselves."

I accepted his suggestion. "You don't like her," I hinted as soon as the door had closed behind her.

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"She doesn't like me. She has taken a strong and intuitive dislike to me for coming in here and wasting your time and energy. Subordinates are so much more stingy of their employer's time than employers are themselves. Not that it isn't excusable in your case. You haven't been sleeping well, have you?"

"No. I feel as if I had been drawn through a rat hole this morning."

"You need a rest. You must get away from the excitement of all this."

"I—I've been thinking of doing that."

He nodded. "When are you leaving?"

"Oh, I don't know."

"Ah, as soon as things shape themselves up right, I suppose."

I nodded. Was Trask never going to get down to business? His circumlocution made me restive. "Well, what about the Alster case? Are you ready to turn in your account and close it up?" I brought him back.

"N-o, not exactly."

What was the matter with Trask? I had not dreamed he could be so undecided. "But I thought you said you were through," I protested.

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"I don't want to deceive you," he broke in.

"You mean you still want to keep on with it?"
I stared at him with amazement.

"You misunderstood me. I said I was about through with it," he explained.

"Oh!" I laughed, wondering on what score he thought to keep on it longer.

Trask jerked his chair round so that he faced me. "Swan," he said suddenly, "who was it that telephoned you the news from the house the morning after the murder?"

"Agnes—yes, Agnes, the maid."

"Yes, can you remember just what she said to you?"

"I don't know." I thought a moment. "Why, yes, something to the effect that Miss Alster couldn't be waked and Miss Beatrice wanted me to come right up to the house."

"That was all?"

"Yes."

"She didn't go so far as to say that Miss Alster had been murdered?"

"No."

"You're sure of that?"

"Why, yes—of course." I looked at him. "Good

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Lord, you aren't off now on a blind trail after poor Agnes, are you?"

"No."

"Then what?"

"Swan, I want you to think very carefully before you answer my next question."

I started involuntarily at his solemn tone. Whom in the name of heaven was he suspecting now? His manner irritated me; his last words swelled huge to me as a threat; I had to take a grip on myself to keep from showing the nervous defiance he had roused in me. "Go on," I said controlling my voice.

He waited—waited—waited. It was as if he were determined to work up my nerves to their highest pitch with his intolerable silence. The office seemed insufferably hot. I got up, went over and opened a window, came back, sat down, looked at him expectantly—and still he waited. I became obstinate, angry, determined not again to request his confidence. Suddenly, my mind roamed off over everyone else whom he now could possibly suspect, came back foiled, without an answer. In a rage I vowed not to ask him another question. My rage burned, flashed up like a bonfire, burned out. I

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felt my purpose weakening. I could stand anything better than this insufferable waiting. Fool! I asked him to go on again and my voice trembled in spite of myself.

"You remember I told you I met young Avery this morning?" he inquired in a voice so smooth and calm that it made me furious again.

"Yes, what of that?" I delighted in the snarl that had gone with my words. "For God's sake, if you suspect him or anyone else, get it out."

He bent toward me sharply. "Swan," he demanded, "if Agnes telephoned you only that Miss Alster couldn't be waked, how was it that you told the Averys that morning that Miss Alster had been murdered?"

I collapsed.

"How did you know it before you had been told?"

I sat staring at him stupidly, speechlessly.

"How could you know it before you had been up to the house?"

I could not see him now. He had faded away directly before my eyes. I could only hear his voice from a great distance—a word now and then—a dull murmur in between.

"Thumb print . . . pistol used . . . never told

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a soul . . . no one else noticed it . . . took impression . . . must have yours now . . . compare . . .”

I started to rise to make for the open window. He closed with me and held me in my chair. I struggled until I was exhausted, until I saw how useless it all was. I lay back in the chair. My mind went blank.

Suddenly I became conscious that Trask was washing my face with cold water, was murmuring his sympathy for me. It was too much. I threw my head on my arms. I broke down.

Five minutes later I confessed.

XXI

LITTLE remains to be recorded to complete this story. I murdered Miss Alster. I did it on the spur of the moment. That is the best that can be said of me. For some time after I did it, I cajoled myself into believing that my strongest motive was Beatrice, but, after my confession, I began to see things more clearly, as they really were, without any further self-deception, without any need of it. Now, I know that my real impulse was a selfish one wrapped in a thin disguise of unselfishness. I want to be quite frank and honest about it now.

When I took Miss Alster to the opera that night, I made my first mistake, the mistake which led directly to it. I allowed her to perceive that I was in love with Beatrice. The change toward me in her attitude was instant. She put me in my place with a few hot, quick words. I accepted her rebuke with meekness and apologies, praying to heaven that my error would not lose me Miss Alster's favor. I can only say that the loss of her patronage meant

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everything to me. The story shows that. And so, when soon afterward she rose in the midst of the performance to leave the opera house, I felt that I had lost—lost everything. I felt I was resented to the hopeless drudgery and oblivion of my former work with Avery, Avery & Avery.

She said not a word to me on our ride back to her house except to order me to stop the taxi at the corner instead of driving up to the door. I wondered at this. I wondered if her sudden return home and her sullen preoccupation on the way might not be due to something other than her offense at my confession. When we approached the house and I saw her look up at the light in the library and mutter, "Now, Miss Linda, I'll catch you at it," I took hope.

Eager to restore myself in her favor, I seized the key from her hand and opened the front door. She swept by me without a word and ran upstairs. I was half a block away on my journey home before I realized that I still had her latchkey in my hand.

I returned to the door, but hesitated to ring the bell. It seemed to me that she might think me more considerate if I bore the key straight to her myself. I entered the house with her key. I went

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upstairs, hopeful that she would appreciate my action. The lights in her room were on and the door half open. I knocked and, fancying that she bade me enter, I went in.

She was not in the outer room. I went into the inner room. She was not there. And then it dawned on me for the first time that the loud and angry voice I heard on the floor above was hers. At the same moment, I heard her exclaim,

“Beatrice, I’ve caught you this time! I know it was Keith I surprised you with. Your silence won’t protect him. But to think that you, too, would flirt with the butler in my house! I might have known it, after learning that you have been making advances even to Mr. Swan, my new lawyer. But you shan’t pull the wool over my eyes any longer. To-morrow Keith leaves my house, and to-morrow, young lady, I’ll discharge Mr. Swan and make a new will disinheriting you.”

She said more, but I failed to hear it. I had already heard the worst. I was to lose the one chance in my life and Beatrice was to be disinherited. I don’t know how long I stood there in her room undecided what to do, whether to leave the key and attempt to steal away unnoticed or to wait and face

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her. But while I was yet dazed by the terrible results of my mistake, she came running furiously down the stairs, cutting off my retreat.

I simply could not face her in my terribly agitated state of mind. Without realizing what I was doing, I slipped into a corner of the inner room as she entered the outer one. There I crouched low, thinking only of seizing the first chance offered to escape. But she seemed watchful and strangely suspicious. She drew a chair into the inner room. She sat down within a few feet of me with her back toward me, shutting off my escape. I wondered why she had unaccountably chosen to sit just there. At last I learned. Her eyes were riveted on a mirror in the outer room. In this mirror she watched the door as if to intercept some passerby in the hall outside. And soon she leaned back in her chair, as though asleep; but she did this too quickly, I knew she was merely feigning sleep while she kept watch of that door.

My own alarm gave way to a feeling of indignation at the summary manner in which she had treated me merely for having confessed an honest liking for her niece. It was unfair, unjust, unutterably mean and spiteful of her, after she had raised

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in me such vast hopes. I crouched there in the corner behind her for what seemed hours, but for what could only have been a few minutes, and my rage against her grew higher with every moment. Then my muscles became cramped, I could crouch there no longer. I put my hand on the dresser at my side to rise, and it came upon the pistol she always kept there. I drew it down to me. It was as if I had been placed there for a purpose. And it was already cocked! I felt a sudden gust of anger. I raised it and fired.

The rest has all been told. I must have slept some of the time, but it seemed to me as if I never slept a minute from that moment until after my confession.

I am sorry. I could not foresee in that one hot instant the sad confusion my crime has wrought in the lives of so many others. I like to think that for that one moment I was insane, but I offered no such excuse for my action at the trial. I wanted to expiate my crime. This was an excuse reserved for myself.

I cannot repair the havoc I caused in many lives, but at least I am expiating my crime. And yet I must be frank and admit that I was relieved when,

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because of work by Mary Walsh, I was sentenced to prison for life instead of being sent to the electric chair.

It was Mary who prepared my mother for meeting me and led her away from this prison. It was due to Mary that I am alive to write this. Dear, loyal, unselfish Mary Walsh! If I had only seen you in your true light in time instead of groping ambitiously for another above my station in life. When I get out, I must try to make up to Mary something of all she has done for me. She has won over the judge who sat at my trial; she has won over the district attorney; she has obtained their promises not to oppose her plea for a parole for me from the governor a few years from now.

Everyone has been so good to me! It was Trask who first put me in the way of remaking my life, of redeeming something from all that seemed doomed. He read my statement of what happened that Mary used to secure a lighter sentence for me. He infused me with a belief that I could mitigate the tedium of prison life, that I could perhaps make a lot of money for my mother and Mary by expanding that statement into a book. I have tried it. This is the story.

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